

Roots and Fruits : Bengal - Margaret S. MacGregor

Bengal was the area in which Alexander Duff, the first missionary appointed by the Church of Scotland, worked; he arrived in Calcutta in 1830. One of his legacies has been an emphasis on education, with the establishment of several schools and a college, which he saw as a 'spearhead of evangelism'.

During training at St. Colm's College we always had in front of us in the Chapel the beautiful window of the risen Christ pictured walking on a rocky road - a constant reminder for us that 'He goeth before' and that we were going to India not as pioneers to countries where Christ was not already at work, but to places which were within the sphere of God's grace. As missionaries of the Church of Scotland, we were 'given' to well-established Churches to be used as they saw fit according to their needs and our talents and abilities. I always appreciated the fact that I was sent direct from one Church to another - without any Society as a kind of go-between. It was to the Bengal Church Council of the United Church of Northern India that I was appointed in 1959. (The United Church of Northern India had been formed in 1924 with the union of Congregationalists and Presbyterians.)

Looking back on my 35 years in India, I feel grateful that they covered a most interesting period. I arrived in Calcutta (now Kolkata) some 12 years after Independence, which meant that the amount of 'colonial baggage' was less than it must have been during the days of the British Raj. Relationships were easier - friendships could be established more readily than before. The top positions in schools, colleges and hospitals, as well as in the Church, were in the hands of Bengalis - and there were many Bengalis to whom I could look up as elder brothers and sisters, who were ready to give friendship, hospitality, and advice. The Bengal Church Council (U.C.N.I.) was the first to have Integration, about 5 years before I arrived, and those of us who had come from abroad, sent by the Church of Scotland or the London Missionary Society, felt that we were treated as people, not as a race apart, and were expected to play a full part in the life of the Church. These were the closing years of the U.C.N.I., as we were preparing for the larger union which was to take place on 29th November, 1970. We rejoiced at the large union, involving six denominations, yet for those of us in the U.C.N.I. in Bengal there was a tinge of sadness as our 'family' was divided into two Dioceses of the Church of North India. This, however, was an opportunity for new friendships and new relationships.

My life in India can be divided into the period before Church Union and the period after it. Under the Bengal Church Council I was involved in some school work and 'women's work', visiting women's groups in the Council's area from Jiaganj in Murshidabad District (130 miles North of Calcutta) to Gosaba in the Sunderban area. After Church Union my involvement in women's work continued (I was Joint Secretary for women's work in Calcutta Diocese for a few years, when we brought the different strands of Women's Fellowships and Mothers' Unions together within the Women's Fellowship for Christian Service), but I began teaching in Bishop's College part-time, and it was decided by the Diocesan Council in 1972 that I should be a full-time member of staff there. (Theological colleges in India are residential, so I was given a flat in the College compound.) I feel that the work in the earlier period was a preparation for my work at the later stage; I would not have liked to go straight from Scotland into teaching in a theological college, as I believe some experience of the Church situation in India as well as knowledge of a local language is necessary

to make one's teaching relevant - even though the main subject of my teaching was Greek. The 22 years or so in Bishop's College was a widening of experience and of the ministry for me, with staff and students from many parts of India and Bangladesh and from several denominations. We learned from one another about different ways of worshipping, even though we did not always agree with one another. We could disagree within the one family! We even sometimes called ourselves 'mini-India'. Perhaps, in a country where communalism has been rising, this is an area in which the Church can contribute to the life of the nation - showing how people of different backgrounds can work together even when not agreeing about everything.

One of the most interesting and challenging things we did at Bishop's College was to run Laypeople's Courses. Those who took part were committed and regular in their attendance (in spite of the transport difficulties of Calcutta), and tutors had to be alert to respond to the questions and discussions that took place. These discussions contributed not only to a deeper understanding of faith but also to a growing in understanding of the issues that confronted us in living in present-day society. Another encouraging point about the courses was the good proportion of women, eager to learn, and wishing to prepare themselves for fuller service in the Church. Over my years in India I was happy to see the growing number of women taking their full place both in Church and in society - though there is still some way to go. When I joined the staff of Bishop's College there were no women students; over the years several came. I was ordained in St. Paul's Cathedral in 1985 - the first woman to be ordained in the Church of North India; many women at that time said a door had now been opened, but although some women from Kolkata have studied theology, as yet none has been ordained. (The C.N.I. has women Presbyters in many other Dioceses.)

Let me mention an incident which happened some years ago, when I was due to travel to Scotland for a short leave. As so often, I was having difficulty in obtaining my Income Tax Clearance. As the date of the flight approached and I still did not have the necessary certificate, I met the officer who was to give the final signature - who was surprised that I had had so much difficulty in reaching this stage and phoned the junior officer to say he must deal with this case immediately. After another day going from one office to another I met him again with the final form for him to sign. As he added his signature he apologised for all the trouble I had had, especially since I was a teacher; he was of the old school, with the belief that teachers should be respected. Then he asked, "Which country are you from?" When I replied, "Scotland," he stopped writing and turned to me with the words, "Your country has done so much for our country."

The most important ways in which one country, or one Church, or one person influences another are intangible. Alexander Duff not only founded a college but also worked tirelessly for the establishment of the University and the Medical College in Calcutta, and was highly regarded in the community; yet he wished to be remembered as one of his Indian friends had suggested - 'by profession a missionary; by his life and labours, the true and constant friend of India'. Missionaries of the Church of Scotland are remembered for their contribution in the sphere of education, or of medicine, or of administration; but I suspect most of us would feel happiest to be remembered as true and constant friends of India, whose main contribution has been an influence for good.