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Historical Facts

relating to the

Augustinian Convent

Bandel, Booghly



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HISTORICAL FACTS
RELATING TO THE
AUGUSTINIAN CONVENT
OF
BANDEL, HOOGHLY.



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P R E F A C E .

THIS LITTLE *BROCHURE* has been published with a view to impart some information regarding the Bandel Church, the oldest Christian Church in Bengal. This year, 1899, completes the tercentenary of its existence; and as preparations to celebrate the event have been made with fitting solemnities, the publication of this booklet will no doubt prove acceptable. Old Church records have been consulted, also a very old calendar of the late Barretto & Co., at one time the leading merchants of Calcutta; and a pamphlet, entitled *Hooghly : Past and Present*, has been laid under contribution,—not to mention other minor sources of information. Perhaps some facts here enumerated may appear strange and marvellous, but bearing in mind that “Truth is stranger than Fiction” they will receive credence.

M. V. RODRIGUES,

November 1899.

Prior.

Historical Facts
relating to the
Augustinian Convent at Bandel,
HOOGHLY.



THE EXACT DATE when the Portuguese first established themselves in Bengal is not known. But it is generally admitted by most historians that in 1537, Admiral Sampayo entered the river Hooghly, with nine Portuguese vessels, with the promised help to Emperor Mahmood, who, being hard pressed by the famous Sher Shah, had asked the Portuguese representative in Goa for assistance.

This help, however, came too late, and was therefore of no use to the Emperor. But, in consideration of their trouble and expense, he

gave them permission to establish a factory; and accordingly, Admiral Sampayo selected Hooghly as the most suitable place for the purpose.

• The factory soon grew into importance and became a great centre of trade. To safeguard this, the Portuguese, under Admiral Sampayo built a quadrangular fort at a place called Gholghat (afterwards corrupted Hooghly), about midway between the present Jubilee Bridge and the Hooghly Jail. Some traces of this ancient Lusitanian hold are still visible in the bed of the river, which, even up to the present day, attracts many a curious traveller.

The exact date of the commencement of the missionary labours by the Portuguese in Bengal cannot also be ascertained. But as the Portuguese conquests went always hand in hand with the propagation of the Gospel, it may be safely surmised that it was not long before they commenced this ennobling work.

Having secured the services of a small band of Augustinian Friars, then the richest and the most powerful religious body in Goa, the authorities conceived the idea of making fresh conquests to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. About the year 1580, a certain Captain, named Tavares, a great favourite with the Moghul Emperor Akbar, obtained from

him full liberty to preach the new faith publicly, and also to erect churches for public worship.

In 1599 a convent was erected in Bandel, a village at a distance of about a mile from the factory, which soon became the head-quarters of these zealous missionaries, whence they sallied forth, far and wide, to extend the kingdom of their Divine Master.

. They did not labour in vain, but added many new souls to the true fold. In a short time two other churches were erected within the limits of the factory; a military chapel was added to the newly built fort; and the poor were also provided for by the establishment of an alms-house under the title of *Santa casa da Misericordia*. This latter institution served the double purpose of an alms-house and of an educational establishment, where many a youth, rich and poor, received the benefits of a sound Christian education.

For nearly thirty years the Portuguese continued to prosper both in trade and commerce, their factory was largely extended, and proportionately they strengthened their fortifications, which became in time a standing menace to the Moghul Governor of Bengal, who, being jealous of their power, sought for an opportunity to humiliate them.

About the year 1622, Prince Harun, afterwards Emperor Shah Jehan, revolted against his father Emperor Jehangir, and knowing the superiority of the Portuguese in military affairs, asked the Portuguese Governor to help him with some soldiers and artillery, promising in return large tracts of land and immense riches. Michael Rodrigues, the then Governor of the factory, replied that he could not think for a moment of helping a rebel son against his own father, and sent him away without any further ceremony. The Prince never forgave this taunt and insult, as will be seen later on. The issue of the rebellion was rather a doubtful one, but the old Emperor died, and Shah Jehan ascended the throne in 1628.

His first thought on ascending the throne was to adopt means to humiliate the Portuguese and thus avenge himself for the insult he had received eight years back. An opportunity soon presented itself. His Subhadar in Bengal was a bitter enemy of the Portuguese, and knowing his master's bent of mind, reported to him that these Portuguese intruders, who had fortified their factory, and had mounted it with cannon, had become insolent and oppressive. The Emperor, who was seeking an opportunity, at once gave orders for their immediate extermination, and for this purpose vested his Subhadar with all the necessary powers.

He soon collected together an army of about 10 to 15 thousand strong, and marched upon the Portuguese factory and laid siege to their fort. The Governor had only 200 trained men under him, but these, with the help of the Portuguese gentlemen then in the factory, kept the enemy in check for nearly a month. The Moghul Subhadar saw that even a very large army was no match for a handful of well disciplined soldiers with a plentiful supply of ammunition; and having lost a good portion of his army, he decided upon other plans; and raising the siege, retired to his own head-quarters.

Having retired from the place, he, however, lost no time in working upon his plans. He succeeded in bribing a vile Portuguese officer who, like Judas of the Gospel, sold his master and his comrades for a few thousand pieces of silver. He undertook to secretly let the enemy in, and fixed St. John's day for the purpose.

In the meantime, the enemy ruined the fortifications, and made other necessary preparations for a fresh assault. On the 24th of June 1632, whilst everybody was in the church attending the divine service, the enemy secretly gained entrance into the Fort, set fire to the arsenal, took possession of all the arms and then blew up the fortifications.

The people who were panic-stricken were massacred without any mercy ; the Governor was captured and burnt alive, and over a thousand men, women and children were made prisoners of war, and were carried to Delhi, then the metropolis of the Moghul Empire. All the churches and other public buildings were rased to the ground, the entire factory being a complete wreck. Out of nearly 300 vessels then in port, it is said only a few succeeded in escaping. The only place which escaped with comparatively small damage was the Convent at Bandel, situated as it was about a mile away from the limits of the factory. Of the prisoners who were carried to Delhi the young girls were added to the harems of the Emperor and his nobles, the elderly women were turned into slaves or domestic servants, and the remainder, over four-hundred men, were put into prison.

Amongst these latter were five Augustinian Friars, four of whom were forthwith put to death and the remaining one, an old zealous Minister of God, named Fre Joao da Cruz, was enjoined to persuade his unfortunate countrymen to join the faith of Islam. The old man, on the contrary, encouraged the unfortunate prisoners to bear up their misfortunes with a true Christian spirit, and tried by his sweet discourses to soften as much as it was in his

power the rigours of an Oriental prison. The Emperor, being apprised of this, ordered poison to be put into his food. This taking no effect, he commanded him to be imprisoned in a closed cell for a week, and to be allowed no food whatsoever, thus intending to take away his life by starvation. At the end of this period, however, to his great chagrin and mortification the jail authorities found the old man hale and hearty. In fact, all the vile means adopted to get rid of this venerable man failed, for our Divine Redeemer had chosen him as an instrument for the glorification of his Spouse, our Holy Mother the Church, as will be seen later on.

The Emperor, finding that all his efforts to make them apostatise were of no avail, and urged by the Empress, whose hatred to these brave Christians was most marked, sentenced all the prisoners, including the old friar, to be publicly devoured by wild animals.

A wild elephant was secured and kept in an iron cage without food for a week; a day was fixed for the public slaughter of these unfortunate Christians, a grand Durbar arranged, and a large arena prepared, at one end of which a large throne was erected for the Emperor and his retinue.

The brave Christians received the news of this monstrous decree with the greatest satisfaction,

for they considered it a singular privilege to have an opportunity of shedding their blood for the sake of Him, who, for the redemption of mankind, had shed His own to the very last drop. Bearing all this in mind, and admonished by their zealous pastor, they prepared themselves, as true and faithful followers of Jesus Christ, to meet their fate.

The day came, and people from all sides flocked to Delhi to witness this extraordinary spectacle. A public execution of these white idolators, as they called the Portuguese of the time, was a sight suited to their fanatical taste, and thus the day fixed was regarded as a national holiday. The ground surrounding the arena was one mass of populace, eagerly expecting the arrival of the Emperor. He was not long in coming to the scene. A flourish of trumpets soon announced his presence, and in a moment the throne prepared was occupied by him and his retinue. When everything was ready, the prisoners were brought out from their unearthy dungeons headed by the venerable Friar. All eyes were at once turned to these victims, but their countenance depicted complete resignation, and not a faltering step was observable as they marched with a firm step into the arena. The prisoners having taken their place at one end of the arena directly opposite the Emperor's throne,

a messenger from the Emperor came to Fre Joao da Cruz, and asked him if the prisoners had changed their mind. The answer being in the negative, the cage of the elephant was ordered to be brought into the arena and placed facing the prisoners; the door was opened and the furious animal let loose.

As soon as the door was opened the infuriated brute made one dash towards the unfortunate Christians, who were a few paces to the rear of Fre Joao da Cruz, and it appeared as if the animal was about to sweep everything that lay before it. But directly it was a few yards from the holy priest, all its fury seemed to have vanished, and the elephant became as mild as a lamb. Then approaching him most reverently bowed before him three times, and lifting the priest most carefully with its trunk placed him on its back and carried him to the Emperor's throne.

The sensation, which this extraordinary behaviour on the part of an irrational animal must have caused amongst the immense fanatical crowd assembled there, can be better, imagined than described. With one voice they demanded of the Emperor the immediate revocation of his monstrous decree, saying at the same time that these Christians were really the chosen people

of—"Allah"—and to harm them would be bringing down destruction upon their country.

The Emperor, who was himself terror-stricken, lost no time in immediately revoking his decree, and granting full and unconditional pardon to all the Christians. As soon as he had done this the elephant, replacing Fre Joao da Cruz on the ground, bowed before him as it had done before, and then going back, entered its cage and remained there quite still.

The Emperor then came down from his throne and commanded the holy man to ask whatever he wanted. He replied that the Portuguese had no intention of robbing him of his lands or riches, and all he desired was permission to return unmolested with all his countrymen to the Convent of Bandel, and also full liberty to preach the Christian faith throughout his kingdom.

The Emperor at once granted these reasonable demands, and provided him liberally with funds to enable him and his countrymen to return to Bandel. He also gave him, as an absolute and permanent gift by the "Firman," 777 biggahs of land in the village, of Bandel surrounding the Convent with power to administer justice within the place.

Fre Joao da Cruz thanked the Emperor for his magnanimity, and collecting all the Christians together returned thanks to the Divine Redeemer for their miraculous deliverance. He then returned and settled in Bandel.

In olden times the Prior of the Convent was like a petty governor, collecting rents, administering justice and had even a small police force of his own.

The centre of attraction at the present moment in this once famous place is the Statue of OUR BLESSED LADY OF HAPPY VOYAGE.

Truly she has been a perfect haven of rest to one and all without distinction of creed, who have trusted and confided in her immense power before the throne of our heavenly Father. Thousands, both rich and poor, from far and near, have visited, and continue to visit, this holy shrine, bearing with them costly and precious offerings in fulfilment of some vow, and in gratitude for some particular graces or favours obtained through her intercession. This devotion, moreover, is not confined to Catholics only, but numbers of our separated brethren and pagans as well, will be found amongst those who go there with their offerings.

This very same statue was, it is admitted, located on the altar of the Military Chapel in the

Portuguese Factory at Hooghly, which was destroyed by the soldiers of Shah Jehan during the capture of Hooghly from the Portuguese.

The holy priest Fre da Cruz had a great devotion to our Lady of Happy Voyage and was wont to spend many hours in prayer at the foot of this particular altar. Another pious Portuguese merchant, an intimate friend of Fre da Cruz and a fervent Catholic, it is said, had also a lively faith in her maternal power and invoked her aid in all his undertakings. During the confusion which followed the assault on the Portuguese fort, this pious man, fearing that the statue, so dear to him, would not escape the polluted hands of the soldiery of Shah Jehan, watched for a favourable opportunity, and taking it from the altar jumped into the river with the intention of swimming across with it; but was seen no more. This impressed the holy priest Fre da Cruz, who was amongst the war prisoners, and who had witnessed this daring act of his intimate friend, and he never ceased praying for the safety of his intimate friend and the holy statue.

The old monastery at Bandel, situated about a mile from the Portuguese Factory, also suffered, though not so severely from these Islam fanatics. It is to this monastery that the handful of

Christians, who were taken prisoners and miraculously released as it has been related already, had returned and settled.

Some time elapsed, and this brave little band, quite content with their lot, collected a little money, and headed by their zealous pastor, commenced to repair the damages that this house of God had received and to improve it in other ways. In this they were materially assisted by Christians from all parts of India and Ceylon, and in a comparatively short time were able to complete their arduous task.

Just when nearing completion, however, one beautiful night the water of that portion of the river directly opposite the church was greatly disturbed. The great river gradually commenced to roar as if a fearful storm was approaching, so much so that the holy priest was roused from his slumbers. Suddenly a voice, as if that of his intimate friend who had jumped into the river with the statue during the assault on the factory, was heard, which spoke in these terms:—

Salve ! Salve ! Salve ! a nossa senhora de Boa Viagem que deu nos esta victoria. Levante, levante, o padre e oraí por todas nos.

“Hail ! Hail ! Hail ! to our Lady of Happy Voyage who has given us this victory. Arise ! Arise ! Oh Father ! and pray for us all.”

The holy priest was unable to sleep, but went at once to the window to see if he could fathom what all this meant. But directly he had opened one of the venetians, he perceived that a portion of the river was beautifully illuminated, and it appeared as if some one was approaching towards the church. In another moment the beautiful light disappeared, all the noise ceased and everything was quite still again. The holy man, however, made no further endeavours in this direction, but persuading himself that it was only his imagination that had deceived him, sought his couch, and was soon fast asleep.

Early the next morning half-a-dozen pagans were seen near the church compound shouting that *Guru mā* (Bengali appellation of the Blessed Virgin Mary) had come to reign in the temple. The servants of the church, noticing this, ran at once and roused their master. The holy man, after hearing what the servants had to say, saw at a glance that his experience of the previous night was no dream but a reality, and at the same time remembered the voice of his faithful friend that had addressed him. He dressed as quickly as he could and ran out to verify the truth for himself.

To his great surprise, a few yards from the gate he beheld the image of his beloved and

heavenly mother, at whose feet he had poured out so often the longings of his pious soul.

He prostrated himself before the statue, made a short act of thanksgiving and carried the image with great devotion and placed it on the principal altar.

A special feast was kept up with great pomp in honour of this miraculous event, and on the feast day the image was carried in procession and placed in the small cavity on the tower facing the river.

Some years afterwards, however, it was again removed to the place which it now occupies, facing the north, in the direction of the Hooghly station.

A ghat was also built on the site where the statue was found in commemoration of this great event, which can still be seen, the contributions for which came, not only from the Christians, but also from some of the pagan families of the neighbourhood.

On the feast day our heavenly mother had another wonder in store for her devoted children. This relates to the great Portuguese mast which is fixed before the main door of this historical church.

In those days of Portuguese power in India Bengal was visited by a large number of Portuguese vessels, which constituted the vehicle of extensive commercial operations between Europe and the East. Several Portuguese firms, doing a very large business, were established in Bengal; and even up to a comparatively late period, the firm of D'Souza & Co. had an office in Mission Row, Calcutta. Alas! the firm no longer exists, and its last representative, so well known in Calcutta for his munificent gifts in the cause of charity, lately died in England. Another princely firm was that of Barretto & Co., and charitable endowments founded by Signor F. Barretto are yet being administered by the Administrator-General of Bengal.

The history connected with the mast standing on the grounds of the Bandel Church is strange, but nevertheless authentic. While the religious ceremonies in connection with the remarkable discovery of the image were about to begin, a large Portuguese ship suddenly appeared at the Ghat, facing the south entrance of the church. No previous intimation had been received of this ship; and the officers and crew were not a little surprised to find that they had been brought to the very gates of a church, unknown to them even by name. They availed themselves of the opportunity thus afforded to them

of taking part in the celebrations. The service being over, the Captain had an interview with the Rev. Fre da Cruz, in the course of which he related how his vessel had encountered a terrific storm in the Bay of Bengal, how the safety of the vessel had been endangered,—huge waves, rising mountain-high, threatened every moment to engulf the vessel. The Captain, a religious man, devoted to the Blessed Virgin, then made a vow promising suitable offering, if they reached some harbour in safety. His prayer was evidently heard, for the storm soon began to abate, and after a short time perfect calm succeeded. Favourable wind and tide had brought them to the Bandel Ghat.

The Captain had one mast of his vessel removed and presented it to the Church as a votive offering. Indeed he had it fixed in the ground where it has remained ever since. The mast has defied the elements for about three-hundred years; and an examination of the wood shows no signs of decay—indeed it bids fair to last many years more. Unfortunately, the name of the ship has not been preserved.

The Bandel Church is yearly visited by a large number of persons. Many vows have been fulfilled during the course of three centuries; and the efficacy of prayers addressed

to the Blessed Virgin receives confirmation from the votive offerings, which have been, and are yet presented to the Church. The old edifice is a living monument of the Catholic Faith in Bengal. Four solemnities are specially observed in the Church, namely, the Feast of the Blessed Lady of Happy Voyage in the month of May; the Feast of the Patron Saint Augustine in August; the Feast of the Blessed Lady of Rosary or the Novena in November, and the Feast of Domingo da Cruz in February or March—the first Sunday in Lent—a solemn procession in the grounds of the Bandel Convent being attended by a large number of Catholics. The procession represents the journey of our Lord to Calvary with the cross on his shoulder.

