

Brief History of Our Church of God Work in India

up to the Year 1922

By G. P. Tasker

The story of the beginning of our work in India from the earliest time up to the year 1922 is indeed an interesting one. As I knew intimately most of the personnel concerned, both Indian and American, I am happy to write of them and bear testimony to their deep devotion to Christ and His truth as it was given to them to understand it.

It all began in 1893, with the conversion to Christ of an earnest Mohammedan youth of 16, named Alaud'din Khan, who was then at school in Mymensingh, E. Bengal, and also with keen interest attending a Bible class conducted by a Miss Ehrenburg, of the Australian Baptist Mission, which was working in that district.

The story of this brother's baptism, followed by his kidnapping by fanatical Muslim relatives, who kept him in close confinement for twenty-five days, doing everything in their power to recover him to his former faith, is indeed a thrilling one. Finding their efforts foiled by the wisdom given the boy in replying to all their arguments, they finally sought to spoil his brain, and even to kill him, by putting some of their powerful native poisons into his food. God protected him from harm, even as he did Paul when bitten by the viper. Finally they stopped and let him return to school. In such ways, as we can now see so clearly, the Lord showed that Khan was a chosen vessel unto Him whose life was to have some special meaning in the work of the Church in India.

Another significant fact in this connection is that from the very start of his Christian life Brother Khan decided to believe and to practice only those things which, by a diligent study of the Bible and prayer, he would be enabled to see were clearly taught in the New Testament. It is therefore not surprising that he was soon led into an experience of the Spirit-filled life and a perception of the great truth of the spiritual oneness of all who really are "in Christ". Other important truths, such as the continuing gifts and leadership of the Spirit in the Church which is Christ's body and of which He is the absolute Lord in all things, were made clear to him; with the result that, as he himself wrote, he "became peculiar" and unable to "join" any of the existing denominational churches of the day, though wishing to have full spiritual and co-operative fellowship with all born-again souls wherever he found them.

While attending college in Calcutta he discussed these things with other Christian students, some of whom became favorable to his views. Among these was a young man named Mosir Moses, who was also a convert from Islam, and with whom he continued in prayer and Bible study, despite the reproaches and petty persecutions of some of their more formal Christian friends.

During this time two other important things occurred. He met Mr. R. N. Mundul of Calcutta who was a man of kindred mind, one of whose daughters he finally married. Two other daughters (Sanat and Nalini) later became valued workers in The Shelter, a Home for the rescue and protection of minor girls. This home was established in Cuttack in 1915, under Brother Khan and Sister E. Faith Stewart and helpers, at the earnest solicitation of a local Hindu gentleman. "Father Mundul", as he was affectionately known to all of us, died there in 1936 at the most unusual age of 104 years.

The other important event was his happening to see in some paper an advertisement to the effect that a man in Texas was offering, for a dime, to send to anyone samples of holiness literature published in America. As he was deeply interested in the subject of Christian holiness, Brother Khan at once sent the money and in due time received a package of the papers, among them being a copy of the Gospel Trumpet Publishing Company's catalogue of books!

Reading there of such works as "Divine Healing of Soul and Body", "Salvation: Present, Perfect, Now or Never", and "The Church of God: What It Is, and What It Is Not", he sent for these and was delighted to find in them the very things the Lord had been teaching him in his own private study of the Bible. And this was the beginning of our acquaintance with him and his work - a growingly intimate spiritual and co-operative fellowship which continued to the day of his lamented death in Calcutta over 25 years later, on October 8, 1922.

Twice our brother visited the churches in America: once in 1903-04, and again in 1908-10. His visits greatly increased our missionary interest and strengthened the spiritual ties between us.

It was after his first visit that E. E. Byrum, then Editor of The Gospel Trumpet, the G. W. Baileys of Washington, and Evalyn Nichols of Idaho returned with him to India. Mr. Byrum stayed for a short time while Mr. Bailey stayed for a whole year. Evalyn Nichols finally married James J. N. Roy of Assam. Mr. Roy shared the same religious views as Mr. Khan. At this time, 1902, there were standing with Roy only about 15 of his own Khassi people, but today they number in the thousands.

Josephine McCrie, of Ontario and the Trumpet Office, also went out in 1905 and rendered valuable service in our work for many years, in Calcutta, Kurseong, Lahore, and Cuttack. Another faithful worker, whose name is in the Book of Life, was Andrew Shiffer, who died in harness years ago in Darjeeling.

Upon Brother Byrum's return to America it was suggested that the work in Assam might be greatly helped if some good farmer were to go out and settle there; which finally led to the going of Brother Victor C. Maiden of Creston, Washington, with his wife and four children. They took with them some of their farming equipment which, however, was found to be quite too heavy for the kind of horses or cattle available in Assam to draw them. Together, with Ira Zaugg, they reached India on November 4, 1906. By some most unfortunate mistake they settled in a very unhealthy part of the country; although, judged by our Western standards, the landscape and soil appeared to be quite suitable. The result was that they soon became ill. The two oldest of the children died on May 19. Both were buried in the same coffin, made by Brother Zaugg. Then the baby died. After this the remaining members of the family moved to Shillong where the altitude was higher and for better care. This move came too late. Soon Mrs. Maiden died, followed by James Strawn of Fenwick, Ontario, who by this time had joined them, to help with the farming. Then on June 10th little Glenn, the last child, five years old, passed away, leaving Brother Maiden alone. He had given his all and exhibited throughout a spirit of faith and consecration, which was to be a never to be forgotten lesson to all who knew him.

After a few months rest, on the large Gorham Tufts tea estates, in the mountains with Brothers Neff, Brooks, Zaugg, and myself, he went to Lahore to help

in the Orphanage there. Robert Jarvis, with his wife Laura, had established this institution for the care of the many orphans who had in previous years been rescued in time of famine, but it happened to be a most unhealthful year. Many of us nearly died. On November 3, 1908, just two weeks after Mrs. Jarvis had passed away, Brother Maiden also died of malaria. The whole Maiden family had passed away within exactly two years of their first arrival in the country!

With the death of his wife, who had been his balance-wheel, it was not many months till Robert Jarvis closed the Orphanage. The property was sold to the Salvation Army. Our missionaries there, Alice Hale of England, Edith Ashenfelter (who had married Amos Abernethy) and Thaddeus Neff, then returned to the homeland. Jarvis, himself, later married another of our missionaries, Lottie Theobald of Zion City, Illinois, and finally retired to Dehra Dun, at the foot of the hills, where in a few years she passed away with smallpox. He presumably must by now have died also and possibly their two children. Thus tragedy and folly are often found mixed with the spiritual triumphs in God's work both at home and abroad.

This brief view of the Church of God work in India would not be at all complete without the mention of some other important steps taken in its development. One is the attempt made by Brother Moses in 1899 to enter the closed land of Tibet. He was able then to go only to the border, but he remained there a year, studying the language and giving the Gospel to all he could. This was later to be of great assistance to him in his work among the Tibetans, when he was enabled to open up a mission in Kurseong, in the hills, where many of the Tibetans could be contacted. His death in Calcutta in 1936 was, next to that of Brother Khan, a great loss to the work.

Another important development was the removal by Brother Khan of his headquarters from Calcutta to Cuttack. This took place following a memorable series of evangelistic meetings he held at Cuttack with his associates in the cool season of 1905-06. He purchased property there on which now stands an undenominational Christian College as well as the Chapel of the Church of God Assembly in Cuttack.

A third development, which seems to hold great promise for the future, was the opening of our work in South India, among the Christians of Travancore, whose religious heritage stems from the work of the apostle Thomas, one of The Twelve, who, tradition says, was martyred by the Brahmins in Madras in A. D. 63. A painting in the Vatican Museum in Rome shows him being pierced with lances by those Hindu priests.

In 1908 and later it was my great privilege to accompany Brother Khan on some of his evangelistic tours in the Native States of Travancore and Cochin. On one of the first trips was P. J. Philip. Then he was but a lad at school, but he found our gospel to be truly "the power of God unto salvation." Some other young men, such as P. V. John and A. J. John, were brought to know the Lord more fully. The former passed away a few years ago, but his sons, with A. J. John, are doing good work in association with the Pentecostal Church of God people.

Our interpreter in all these trips was a fine Christian man by the name of J. N. Spadigam of Cannanore, whose son and daughter still faithfully carry on in a Church of God assembly at that place.

A fourth and very important development was the raising of \$10,000 among the churches at home for the establishment of a new Mission Station at Lalmanirhat in northern Bengal and the coming of the Heinlys and Mamie Wallace to India to take charge of it. They were joined later by Miss Eva Goodwin, a nurse from England, who had been helping in the Shelter while Mrs. Minnie Tasker and I moved from Lahore to Calcutta to engage with Brother Khan in work among the Hindu and Muslin students of the University there. This was, of course, from our standpoint on the field, a most important work. But as it did not accord then with the policy of the Missionary Board at home it never had a chance to develop properly and so finally had to be closed. By this time Brother Khan had been called to his reward.

Other missions, however, had already established hostels and were carrying on work among the students. So that the opening which had been so providentially given for the teaching of the Bible among the University students was, and is, I believe, still being carried on. To God be all the praise and glory. Such Bible-teaching among the non-Christians, like the work being done today in The Shelter in Cuttack, has a very important place in preparing the way for the specific work of the Holy Spirit. It puts the "sword" in His hand.

So that we can rest assured that today, although the specifically rescue work which had called it into being in the first place, is no longer necessary, The Shelter, which has now developed into an Orphanage and High School, is definitely making a most valued contribution to the development of the cause of Christ in India.