

CHRISTIAN SETTLEMENTS IN NEPAL DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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them (Frs. Bernardine of Paludano, Onophrius of Monte Cassiano and Bro. Lawrence of Peretola, a lay brother) were assigned to Nepal.¹⁴ After a year or so, Fr. Benedict Mary of Genoa, a member of the same expedition, first posted to Patna, replaced Fr. Onophrius of Monte Cassiano, who returned to India at the beginning of 1755.¹⁵

In spite of these reinforcements, the number of missionaries continued to remain stationary. Even before the new labourers could reach their field of apostolate, one of the Nepal veterans, Fr. Florian of Jesi, had passed into eternity. Sick and exhausted, Fr. Florian of Jesi had to leave the valley at the beginning of 1753 to seek rest and medical treatment in Patna. But he died at Bettiah on the 4th February, 1753, aged 49 years, while on his way to the capital of Bihar.¹⁶

Fr. Benedict Mary of Genoa, the latest arrival in Nepal, a brave and self-sacrificing priest, was soon carried off by death on the 4th July 1755, at Kathmandu, while nursing some Christians stricken by a contagious disease. He was laid to rest in the new cemetery chapel of the station. In the same year, Bro. Liborius of Fermo, who had been in Nepal since 1740, came down to Bettiah to recoup his health.¹⁷

And so by the end of 1755, only three priests (Frs. Tranquillus of Apecchio, Anselm of Ragusa and Bernardine of Paludano) and two lay brothers (Bros. Paul of Florence and Lawrence of Peretola) were clinging to Nepal, while the station of Patan remained without a priest.¹⁸

Fresh Trouble in Kathmandu

Again there was trouble in Kathmandu in 1752. This time a renegade woman reported the Fathers to the authorities for having committed various crimes and began to

14. *Memorie Istoriche*, p. 154.

15. *Memorie Istoriche*, pp. 173, 205.

16. *Memorie Istoriche*, p. 250.

17. *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, p. 191; *Die Aktensammlung des Bischofs Anastasius Hartmann* p. 33; *Memorie Istoriche*, p. 175-176.

18. *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, p. 190.

blackmail them throughout the capital. In this way she tried to take revenge, as the missionaries had reprimanded her for abandoning the faith. She was further instigated to do this by a group of people, mostly Brahmins, who nursed ill feelings against the poor priests. They hoped that, by having the priests sentenced to a term of imprisonment or relegated into exile, they might grab their belongings and come into possession of their riches, which were thought to be considerable.

As a matter of fact, the accusations levelled against the priests by this renegade woman consisted, in the main, in some acts of imprudence committed by the priests in denouncing the national religion in too strong a language and in the breach of caste laws by the Christians, for which the missionaries were held responsible. These acts of imprudence, in a caste-ridden society, incensed the Brahmins who sought to take revenge.

The priests were tried, but the prosecution failed to produce convincing proof as it was all a camouflage. At this particular time the missionaries were on very good terms with the Raja and the judges were afraid of incurring the displeasure of His Highness by convicting the accused.¹⁹

The Raja of Kathmandu, we read in the same report, never called on anyone, but for once he made an exception in the case of the poor Capuchins. He visited the Church, talked to them about religion and assured them that he would always be their friend and protector. He even went to the extent of suggesting to enlarge the church as the present one was too small. Poor Raja! he was in trouble, and he thought, the humble Capuchins were in a position to deliver him from his difficulties. And so they did. The Raja of Kathmandu was engaged in a war (a mere petty quarrel) with the Raja of Bhatgaon and so the mighty Jaya Prakash Malla Deva made use of the good offices of the Capuchins to negotiate the terms of peace.²⁰

If the Capuchins were powerful enough to settle affairs of state between two petty rajas in these Himalayan regions, they were unable to bridle the tongue of the renegade woman.

19, 20. *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, pp. 189-190.

Having failed at Kathmandu, she went to Patan and there she continued her defamation campaign against the poor priests. Even here the case was tried, but the judges acquitted the priests *in absentia* for lack of evidence.²¹

Another unfortunate incident occurred in 1753. In that year the Prefect was imprisoned. If we are to believe what one of his confreres, not very sympathetic, wrote about it, we have to conclude that, though Fr. Tranquillus was a very zealous missionary, he was nevertheless, an extremely imprudent man.

It was alleged that the queen of Kathmandu had committed adultery with the son of the *Raja Guru* and both were imprisoned. The Prefect went to see them and even spent some money on them in the vain hope of doing some good in spite of the fact that the Raja had expressly forbidden him to call on them. The result was that the paramour was cut to pieces in the presence of the queen and it was fortunate that the priest did not meet the same fate but had to spend some time in jail.²²

Fr. Tranquillus might have been tactless or imprudent in dealing with people, but he was by no means a weakling or a coward. Fearlessly he reprimanded the Raja of Kathmandu for his injustice, cruelty and profligate life whenever occasion demanded it. He did it in all honesty and sincerity believing that such was his duty as a priest. Had he acted with more self-restraint, he might have rendered better service to the mission.

Retorting to the admonitions of the priest, the Raja once said, "What am I to do? If my subjects would obey the law of the true God, His Majesty would surely set everything right, but they do not want to obey, adore and serve Him, and so they are chastised and ruled over despotically".

On this Fr. Tranquillus said to him, "as a ruler and master of your people you are in duty bound to set an example and then you have the right to expect submission and obedience from all your subjects."²³

21. *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, pp. 189-190.

22. *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, p. 188.

23. *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, p. 199.

Calling on some of the Chaubisi Rajas

In his report to the Prefect of Propaganda in Rome, Fr. Tranquillus mentioned that the king of Gurkhas and the king of Tanahu had written letters or sent envoys to him requesting the services of one or more priests in their dominions. These two principalities, situated respectively to the north-west and the south-west of the Nepal Valley, were then part of the Chaubisi Rajas, into which Nepal was divided in the early 18th century. On receipt of this intelligence, Rome directed Fr. Tranquillus to personally visit these two kings at the head-quarters in order to ascertain their disposition towards the Christian message.

Accordingly, in the month of December 1755, the Prefect and Fr. Anselm of Ragusa, both stationed at Kathmandu, went to pay a courtesy call on Prithwi Narayan Shah at his Navakot residence, a small town in the kingdom of the Gurkhas. The Raja was just recovering from a long illness and this made him welcome the two priests all the more eagerly. His Highness thanked them for all the trouble they had taken to come to see him at this particular moment and expressed his admiration for the noble work they were doing in the Valley.

The visit lasted eight days. During this time His Highness reiterated his great desire to have some missionaries in his domain and went to the extent of suggesting to Fr. Tranquillus to leave Fr. Anselm with him for the present. On his part, he added, he would be ready to provide the priest with house, land, servants and anything else he required to make himself comfortable and feel welcome in his territory.

Needless to say, the Prefect was compelled to decline the tempting offer. He however, tried to assuage the Raja's disappointment by promising some priests in the future, should any arrive from Europe.

The goodwill of the Raja is evinced from the fact that Fr. Tranquillus had gone to Navakot also to ask His Highness to be allowed to cut timber from the forest and to transport it to Kathmandu for the construction of a new church there and to obtain exemption from all transit duties. The path to Nepal from India passed through Lahuri Nepal or little Nepal, which was then under the control of the Gurkhas. The

missionaries urgently required transit facilities for goods and baggages forwarded to the mission head-quarters in order to save funds. Prithwi Narayan Shah was pleased to grant both the requests with royal magnificence.²⁴

During the summer of 1756, Fr. Tranquillus was with the Raja of Tanahu in his summer residence at Devghat, at the confluence of the Kali Gandak and Trisuli Gandak rivers, a few days journey from the Valley.

The reception given to the visiting priest by the Raja and his court was even more enthusiastic than that of the king of Gurkhas. His Highness showed himself extremely pleased and overjoyed at his visit.

On this occasion Fr. Tranquillus had taken with him a book entitled *A dialogue between master and disciple on the principles of the Christian religion*, which had been compiled by the Fathers in the Newari language. This gave occasion for inquiries to be made about the Pope, his power and prerogatives and about the territories and rulers of the west. There were also discussions on religion and other similar subjects. The conversation drifted gradually to the motive which made the missionaries to come to Nepal and on the nature of their work and activities.

The presence of the priest at Devghat and the reading of the book brought by Fr. Tranquillus made some impact on all concerned. One day the Raja sent the Prime Minister to call the Prefect, as His Royal Highness wanted to write to the Pope and was much intrigued about the way he was to address such a high dignitary. So impressed was the Prime Minister about the merits of the Christian religion which he had read in the book that, speaking to Fr. Tranquillus about it, he remarked: "Yesterday and today I have been with the king; together we have read the book you have given us. The religion of our gods is good for nothing, and our acts of religion, we boast so much about, have no value before God."²⁵

The Raja of Tanahu did write to the Pope to offer him his

24. *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, pp. 193-194.

25. *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, pp. 194-197.

homage and to ask for priests. It is a letter full of deep feelings in which His Highness informs the Pope that all, the king and his subjects, will welcome the priests most cordially, they will be left free to propagate their religion, will be trusted, will not be harassed and that the message, they will announce to his people, will not fall on deaf ears. The letter was accompanied by a rhinoceros' horn as a gesture of good-will.²⁶

Notwithstanding the pressure brought to bear upon Fr. Tranquillus by the Raja, the priest returned to Kathmandu within a week. It was the intention of the Raja to keep the priest for one year or at least till such time as new missionaries would come to stay in his dominion.

After a few months, in autumn 1756, Fr. Tranquillus was again on the road. For forty-three days he travelled along rugged and narrow paths, over steep and stony terrain, to visit a second time the Rajas of Gurkhas and Tanahu and to call for the first time on the Ruler of Lamju, another of the Chaubisi Rajas to the north of Tanahu. Wherever he went, the Prefect distributed religious literature and talked to all of the Christian message he had come to announce to the people of these lonely Himalayan regions.²⁷

New Prefect Apostolic

Though not yet in his fifties, Fr. Tranquillus of Apecchio was already feeling the weight of the advancing years. His continuous apostolic peregrinations had caused him a fistula in the hip which needed prompt medical attention. Besides, he had lost all his teeth and this made him feel a little embarrassed whenever he had to speak in public. Listless, tired and dispirited, the poor man had already written to Rome in 1753 and again in 1754 requesting his Superiors to relieve him of his office and expressed the wish to be repatriated. No doubt, he had worked himself to the verge of exhaustion and now needed rest badly. Meanwhile, he decided to come

26. *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, p. 196; part IV, pp. 231-232.

27. *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, pp. 200-202.

down to Chandernagore for treatment and left Kathmandu in December 1757.²⁸

At Chandernagore he was advised to proceed to Pondicherry, where he could find excellent surgeons. Overcome by illness and unable to work, he made up his mind to retire and return to Europe. Accordingly, on 2nd February 1758, he nominated Fr. Joseph Mary, the founder of the Bettiah station, Vice-Prefect of the mission until new dispositions were received from Rome. At the same time he addressed a circular letter to all his confreres, notifying them of his departure and the appointment of the provisional superior and embarked for Pondicherry.²⁹

In the meanwhile, Fr. Nicholas Felix of Pergola, a priest of the 10th expedition who originally had been appointed for Bettiah, was ordered to replace the Prefect in Nepal.

On reaching Pondicherry, Fr. Tranquillus underwent medical treatment and felt greatly improved. Nevertheless, he dismissed the idea of returning to the mission as he was still too tired and too frustrated. Hearing that some French vessels had arrived from Europe, he went to the warf to enquire whether some missionaries had arrived, if not, at least some letter. He had been waiting for news for a long time. He was delighted to know that there was some news but sadly disappointed as the news was not of the kind he had been waiting for.

The Procurator General of the Order had written to Fr. Tranquillus in Bengal, in the belief that he was still in the mission, exhorting him to remain at his post and giving hopes that he would soon be relieved of his duties. This unexpected communication made him change his mind. Instead of pursuing his voyage to Europe, he returned to Bengal in the hope that he would still continue to be Prefect of the mission till the appointment of his successor.

In Bengal he was told that the majority of the missionaries felt, it was not proper for him to take over the Superiorship

28. *Memorie Istoriche*, p. 178; *Terzorio B*, *op. cit.*, p. 11; *Nuovo Ramusio*, part II, p. 190.

29. *Memorie Istoriche*, p. 179.

of the Prefecture after having already relinquished it of his own accord and having actually left the territory of the mission with the intention of going home. This news did not upset the humble Friar and on the 21st December 1759, he was back in Kathmandu to work in the capacity of an ordinary missionary.³⁰

At long last, the Congregation of Propaganda decided to give Fr. Tranquillus a successor. The new Prefect was appointed on the 23rd June 1755, in the person of Fr. Antonine of Monte Alboddo. This priest, a member of the ninth expedition, was already on the high seas when he was elected. He was informed about it on his arrival at Rome on 7th August 1756. Not feeling inclined to return to India, Fr. Antonine of Monte Alboddo tendered his resignation. In his place was nominated Fr. Anselm of Ragusa on the 18th September 1758.³¹

Meanwhile, Fr. Anselm of Ragusa, who was due for home leave and was besides, stricken with gout, had to come down to Bettiah late in January 1761, on his way to Chandernagore to board a sailing vessel for Europe. On reaching Bettiah he came to know that Fr. Joseph Mary, the Vice-prefect and the chaplain of the station, had passed away peacefully some days earlier. While stopping at Bettiah to minister to the small Catholic community, of the place, till the arrival of the new chaplain, Fr. Anselm received news, brought by members of the 18th expedition, of his appointment.³² This made him decide to remain on in the mission. His decision was strengthened by the fact that, if he were to go home, the Prefecture would again be without a Superior for a long time. On the other hand, Fr. Tranquillus of Apecchio had exposed himself to severe criticism from some of his confreres for relinquishing his post and electing a Vice-Prefect in his place.

In Patna, Fr. Anselm met the newcomers (Frs. John Gualbert of Massa, Michael Angelo of Tabiago and Seraphin of Como), who had arrived at Chandernagore in July,

30. *Memorie Istoriche*, pp. 179-180.

31. *Memorie Istoriche*, pp. 173-174, 200; *Terzorio B, op. cit.*, pp. 11, 117.

32. *Gli scritti del Padre Marco della Tomba*, Angelo De Gubernatis, Firenze, 1878, p. 12.