

Don Bosco in India
Some Inspiring Lessons from the Past
and Innovative Interventions of the Present
17th March 2014

It is said 'make new friends, keep the old'. The Salesian story in India is 108 years old. Built on the strong foundation laid by the pioneer Salesian missionaries, the Salesian story in India continues to create new frontiers relevant to the multi-cultural and rapidly changing situations of India.

The Salesian story in India has two distinct phases. In 1906 the first group of Salesians reached Thanjavoor in present day Tamilnadu. Soon the communities were established in several parts of South India and the Salesian charism began to spread.

I will devote these few minutes to speak of the second phase of the Salesian story which is the familiar terrain of my ministry.

The second phase of the story unfolded in Northeast India which was called the 'Assam Missions'. In 1922 the pioneer group of Salesians to Assam reached Shillong. The leader was Mgr. Louis Mathias. The group consisted of 11 members, 6 priests and 5 brothers, belonging to 4 nationalities.

It is interesting to note some of the impressions that Mgr. Mathias had expressed before leaving for India. At the solemn ceremony of missionary expedition in the Basilica of Turin in 1921, Mgr. Mathias spoke of the Assam Missions in expressions like 'our promised land', 'incomparable', and 'new Patagonia'. Referring to the numerous languages of India, especially of Assam, Mgr. Mathias said, "We the Salesians will speak the language of the Lord and will repeat the prodigy of the first Pentecost". On their arrival there were about 5000 Catholics in the whole of Assam Mission which had a population of 7 million. On 24 May 1922 at the conclusion of the first Marian procession, the few Salesians of Assam knelt in front of the statue of MHC and consecrated the Assam Mission with a fervent prayer: "We consecrate to you this land, its mountains, its rivers, its people and all its inhabitants". A few years later the Salesians and others described the Assam Mission as the 'miracle of Our Lady'.

Let me point out few of the salient features of this 'miracle of Our Lady'.

- (1) Growth of the Church: At the time of the arrival of Salesians in Assam, the entire NE India was a Prefecture Apostolic with a tiny number of 5000 Catholics. Today the region has 15 dioceses with a catholic population of more than 1,200,000.
- (2) Formation in loco: No doubt, Assam Mission was fortunate to have received some of the most dynamic and zealous missionaries. Many of them reached Assam soon after the first profession and some of them came as novices. It was the daring decision of the pioneer leaders to start the initial formation, starting from novitiate itself in Assam. Against the thinking of the times it was a daring step to have recruited candidates from India and allowed the formation together with the candidates from Europe. Formation in

loco contributed greatly to the learning of local languages and immersion into local cultures. It helped immensely the increase of vocations from India. I can hardly think of any other mission land in which the sons and daughters of the land assumed leadership responsibility in such a short span of time, thanks to the initiative of 'formation in loco'.

- (3) Heroism and Sanctity: Mgr. Mathias had chosen the motto for the pioneer group: "Dare and Hope". Not only the pioneers but the successors lived the motto. The Assam mission had and still has some of the most challenging situations; the difficult terrain; hundreds of languages which are totally unrelated; divergent customs and social practices. The missionaries, most of them lived lives of heroism and suffered hardships. Some of them gave their lives on the altar of martyrdom. The story continues. The holiness lived by them bore fruit. Their sanctity is being recognized and they are on the path to the list of the saints and blessed. We have the great names like Costantino Vendrame, Orestes Marengo, Francesco Convertini, Stephen Ferrando.
- (4) The prolific growth of the Salesian charism: India has 11 provinces today. The youngest being the Province of Silchar with its patron John Paul II. On 27th April, on the day of canonization of John Paul II, a new Salesian parish in the Province, in the state of Tripura, will be inaugurated. Though it is the youngest province in India, it has a long Salesian history with Shillong, the Salesian cradle of Northeast India forming part of the province.

Moving beyond the Northeast India, let me present a bird's eye view of the present day scenario of Salesian India.

- (5) New Frontiers: In a country of 1.2 billion people with less than 2% Catholic number, the impact of Don Bosco Institutions is beyond imagination. Don Bosco is made alive through the traditional apostolate of Parishes, Schools, Technical schools, Youth Centre. But in the recent decades, number of innovative interventions by Salesians in India are making great impact. Some of them are:
 - (a) DB Tech India: A major venture of partnership with the Government of India at the Centre and states level is initiated by the Salesians under the banner of DB Tech India. It aims at imparting life skills to a million and more young people and finding job opportunities for them. Don Bosco has become the biggest NGO in partnership with the Government of India in imparting skill training to young people. In the area of technical education, both formal and non-formal, Don Bosco is making a huge impact all over the country. Every province has several innovative interventions in this regard.
 - (b) IT World: The impact of Don Bosco interventions in the IT world is significant in the provinces. Thousands of young people get trained in the IT domains, facilitated by the Salesians.
 - (c) Collaboration with Government: An innovative frontier is the collaboration with Government and other agencies. Several provinces have signed up MoU with state governments for collaboration. In Guwahati province there is a major intervention of training 5000 teachers for government schools. It is the brainchild

of Rev. Fr. Thomas, provincial of Guwahati when he was the Director of Don Bosco Institute (DBI).

- (d) Education to the reach of the poor: Salesian India has a vast net work of schools in the rural settings, making quality education available to the poor. Most of the provinces have programs for education for Out-of-School children, non-residential Bridge Courses, Remedial Schooling etc.
- (e) Higher levels of Education: Don Bosco has become identical with quality education. In recent years, Salesians are making a felt impact in the higher levels of education. It is to be noted that the first degree college of the entire Congregation is in Shillong, St. Anthony's College, started in 1934. Several colleges are being set up in various provinces to cater to the higher education. Don Bosco University in Guwahati, the first Catholic University in India is making speedy impact at the national and international level.
- (f) Interventions in the area of language, media and culture: It is very well acknowledged that several languages in India developed script and grammar, thanks to the Salesians. A number of Salesians have contributed to the translation of Bible into several local languages; have published numerous catechetical and liturgical books, produced large number of audio-video materials in various languages. Don Bosco Museum in Shillong stands as the icon of appreciation and promotion of indigenous culture.
- (g) YaR Interventions: Salesian interventions in the area of YaR (Youth at Risk) has caught up the attention of the country. At the national and at province level, YaR activities in favor of the most needy children/youth are well coordinated and help thousands of young lives to blossom. Several cities and towns of India have such interventions.
- (h) Interventions for Socio-Economic upliftment: Agricultural training centers, model farms, watershed development projects, financial assistance schemes etc. are integral part of Salesian interventions to uplift the economic standard of the rural population. Salesians have a wide net work of collaboration with government and non-government agencies in this sector.
- (i) Interventions in favor of Refugees and Migrants: The province of New Delhi has a major intervention in favor of refugees from other countries in collaboration with UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees).
- (j) To the Neighbors: The Province of Kolkata has taken initiative in extending Salesian presence and activities to the neighboring countries like Nepal (1993) and Bangladesh (2008). Mumbai province has extended services to Kuwait. Attention is being given to requests for Don Bosco interventions in other Asian countries.
- (k) Mission ad gentes: Thanks to the persistent call of the Mission Department, there is a 'mission ad gentes' awakening in the provinces of India. India with its huge population and demands will never be satisfied with the Salesian personnel and resources. The sizeable number of confreres from Indian provinces present in various mission countries and Salesian Centers and the opening of 'Missionary Aspirantate' in Chennai and Guwahati Provinces are signs of missionary vibrancy and universal outlook.

Don Bosco and his charism have made a deep and effective impact in India. Let me acknowledge the immense contribution that the pioneer Salesians and their successors, especially from Europe and other countries have made to make the dream of Don Bosco for India come true. Still challenges are many, but opportunities are more.

Buona Notte!

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