

THE RISHI MISSION

1. THE NAME: HISTORY OR NON-HISTORY?

Rishi is one of the many names used to designate a group of so-called outcaste people to be found all over Bangladesh but particularly in its south-western part, particularly in the districts of Khulna, Jessore and Satkhira. This is the area where since 1952 the Xaverian Missionaries have been working. In these three districts, according to very approximate estimates the *Rishi* would number more than 200,000 people. Roughly 10 % of them have become Christian. These Christians represent almost half of the Catholics of the Khulna Diocese, to which the above mentioned districts juridically belong. Ethimologically, *Rishi* means 'wise' and according to one of their oral traditions, this group of outcaste people would descend from a sort of noble group which eventually lost its social standing. The *Rishi*, however, are known by other less sympathetic names as well. Among these, the most common are *Muchi*, *Das*, *Horijon*, *Dalit* etc. *Muchi* is the most derogatory word and points to the *Rishi's* traditional work with animal hides. The simple pronunciation of the word *Muchi* compels the speaker to spit on the ground as if to clean the mouth from the impurity left behind by its pronunciation. In the Hindu context, the touching of animal carcasses, particularly of dead cows to the purpose of getting their hides, creates a sort of taboo at the basis of the impurity and untouchability complexes. One is born a *Muchi* and dies as such. Even after death segregation does not end. The place where the *Muchis* are burnt (*shoshan*) is different from that used by and for caste Hindus. A *Muchi* cannot sit at a tea stall and have a cup of tea, he cannot have a plate of rice in restaurants, he cannot have his hair cut etc. because the objects which come into contact with them remain contaminated. *Das* is the title this people are given in schools and offices. It is the name they are registered with for any official purpose. Even today the *Rishi* students going to public schools in Chuknagar, occupy the last places in schoolrooms; some of the teachers too, pride themselves in calling them 'das company.' And *Das* means slave, servant. The term *Horijon* was introduced by Mahatma Gandhi for all so-called untouchable groups. *Horijon* literally means 'sons of Hori' and Hori is the Hindu divinity Visnu. Despite the benevolent intention of Gandhiji, the term was taken by most untouchable people as derogative, paternalist and offensive. *Horijon* for many outcastes just meant 'sons of nobody!' *Dalit* instead is a battle name chosen by the outcaste people themselves following the teaching of Baba Saheb Ambedkar. This name today gathers large number of outcaste people in India, roughly 150 million. The term *Dalit* is a Sanskrit and Bengali past participle. It means shattered, trampled upon, dismembered, pulverised etc. It expresses quite well the condition from which the so-called outcaste people want to be freed, particularly through political action. For those who want to know more about the untouchability complex, a real scourge in the Indian subcontinent cultural milieu, can find ample scope for research as literature on the subject is not lacking. At the level of we Xaverians, Frs. Luigi Paggi (Como, Italy), Sergio Targa (Brescia, Italy) and John Fagan (Scotland) are expert on the subject and could entertain those interested for hours on end. The undersigned, having lived more than 30 years of his life in close contact with the *Rishi*, some years ago has added to his

name also the title *Das*. So now when I need to put my signature on papers I sign as Antonio Germano Das.

From the little I have written, without any sort of pretence, because I am not an expert on the subject, but just a cobbler which by the way, is one of the traditional works of the *Rishi* together with shoe polishing, making etc., it can be seen and understood that any mission to the *Rishi* cannot elude, without betraying itself, the complexity and magnitude of questions the *Rishi* people bring along.

2. THE XAVERIAN MISSIONARIES AMONG THE *RISHI*.

From the very first moment of their arrival in what then was called East Pakistan, the Xaverians directed their attention towards the untouchable population of the then Jessore Diocese, then as now perceived as the last of the last (poorest of the poor). From the 70s however, particularly because of the new pastoral and theological environment created by the II Vatican Council, Xaverians more and more put into practice their preferential choice of the *Rishi* people. The centrality of the *Rishi* question later on assumed the contours of specific concretisations and concerted actions.

- a) CHUKNAGAR-KHAMPUR. Besides the missions of Simulia, Satkhira and Borodol, made up completely by *Rishi* converted to Christianity, in the beginning of the 80s the mission endeavour once again exploded in what then came to be known as 'le vie nuove' or the new ways. The boundary walls of the old mission, it was felt, seemed there to constrain the missionary spirit. There was a much felt need to come out from those walls and invent a new sort of missionary presence, closer to the people, to their sufferings and joys. It thus happened that Fr. Luigi Paggi, coming out of Satkhira parish where he had been parish priest, established himself in the *Rishi para* of Chuknagar. He used to live in a hut very similar to those of the people he was living with. Chuknagar, halfway between Khulna and Satkhira, is situated in an area with a high concentration of so-called outcaste people. Fr. Luigi's settling in Chuknagar was a strategic choice. Only after a couple of years from the beginning of Fr. Luigi's experience, Fr. Pier Lupi established himself in Khampur *Rishi Para*, a place about 15 km to the South-west of Chuknagar. Fr. Lupi's experience lasted only 5 years, but the kind of influence he exerted on the people remains quite palpable even today. Fr. Lupi bought a piece of land and built on it a mud-house with corrugated iron as roof. He then took in 10 *Rishi* students who shared his daily life. Some of these students in the course of time became doctors, some others advocates, and one among them became the director of an NGO by the name of Dalit.
- b) THE WAYS OF THE MISSION. The above is just a very concise introduction to the 'now' of the mission. The ideas behind both the experiences of Chuknagar and Khampur were to respect the *Rishi* people and make them the protagonists of their own history and destiny. From the beginning thus conversion to Christianity was positively excluded. The fathers did not want the *Rishi* people to think of their presence as to a game of 'do ut des'. Gratuity was and still is

the way of the mission in Chuknagar-Khampur. Khampur in fact after the departure of Fr. Lupi remained under the responsibility of the fathers in Chuknagar. As a matter of fact, Fr. Luigi, the founder of the Chuknagar mission, has started a liberation movement among the *Rishi* of the area which has turned out to be unstoppable and irreversible. The real strength of this movement is education, intended in its Anglo-Sassoon meaning as global human promotion, of which alphabetisation is just the starting point. The *Rishi* people have understood that education is the tool at their disposal needed to come out from centuries of seclusion and marginalisation. This movement has taken roots so much so that in almost any *Rishi Para* children do go to school. 13 are the villages linked to Chuknagar, but the movement has gone far beyond these 13 villages thanks also to organisations and groups who work side by side with us, with the same intentions and motivations. The method devised by Fr. Luigi, and backbone of the movement which he started, is that of the Tuition Programme. What is it? The students (from class IV to SSC, i.e. Secondary School Certificate) who attend normal classes at government schools come to the mission or to other centres situated in each village for a two-hour tuition on the three main subjects, i.e. Bangla, English and Mathematics. The kind of impact this Tuition Programme is having, can be seen by the following: next year 63 will be our SSC candidates, of whom 30 girls. In the beginning the programme gathered its teachers from the Muslim and Hindu population. Fr. Luigi himself worked as a teacher for long years. But as soon as the first *Rishi* people were ready, they took over from their Muslim and Hindu colleagues. Now they are all *Rishi*. The programme employs 40 of them. They are actually college students who offer 2 hours tuition every day to their younger brothers and sisters. In so doing they receive a small salary which helps them in their own studies. On the one hand they give and on the other they receive. Apart from the Tuition Programme the mission in Chuknagar houses other activities always related to the *Rishi* struggle. To talk of them would imply another huge chapter.

- c) THE CATECHUMENATE. After about 20 years of Xaverian presence in Chuknagar, the first students, likely moved by the witness of Fr. Luigi and the other who came to stay with him and after him, formally asked to become Christian. Fr. Luigi, from the very beginning very suspicious about such requests, eventually convinced himself that it was not in his right to deny the way of salvation to those who insistently desired it. So the dialogue master-disciple (*guru-shishho*) got completion and fulfilment in the first 10 *Rishi* students who adhered to Christ. The experience of these first students became contagious so that after them others started making the same kind of request. In the year 2001, to respond to this new challenge arising from the mission in Chuknagar, I was asked to come to Chuknagar and formally start the Catechumenate. The mission had to maintain its original outlook, that of being a place open to all, Muslims and Hindus alike. The novelty was only in the *Rishi's* attempt to walk in the way of Christ. In the meantime Fr. Luigi left Chuknagar to follow the

inspiration of a new calling. He went to live with the Munda people at the extreme Southwest of the country, right on the border with the tropical forest of the Sundarbans. Fr. Sergio Targa, 25 years younger than me, took his place. All the activities of the mission linked to human promotion received new impulse and creativity. I had thus the time to prepare myself and devise a serious process of catechumenate. After a period of 5 years, a group of 51 people, young and adults, in the Easter vigil of 2006 received the Sacraments of Initiations at the hands of the bishop of Khulna in the cathedral church. Year after year other people joined the catechumenate. Right now we have 8 groups divided according to age and level of instruction. The total number of catechumens is now 150.

Unfortunately, towards the end of 2005, Fr. Sergio too left for new enterprises, leaving me alone. For the last 3 years, all the complex activities of the mission in Chuknagar have thus been revolving around me. This is certainly a heavy task for my not so young age! Indeed, I am writing these lines after 5 months from the surgical operation I had for cerebral ematoma; the fact that I managed to draw to an end this script, allow me to think that I have completely recovered my strength: I am grateful to the Lord for this. I still foster a dream though. The small but expanding Christian community in Chuknagar has not got as yet a proper place where to worship. We celebrate the day of the Lord in a classroom. Nearly at 70, I start to believe that the Lord wanted my return to Chuknagar to accomplish this first phase of evangelisation with the building of a Church.

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