

Historical Notes on Missions to Railway People in India.

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The Railway Mission

The following notes are compiled from material to hand in February 2014 principally an abstract of the Railway Mission archive as held at the National Railway Museum in York.

The first reference to India noted was from the minutes of the General Committee for September 22, 1887 when it was recorded that books had been sent to Africa and India. In the following year the minutes for April 19 state that the Bombay Tract Society would be asked to distribute the *Railway Signal*, the Mission's journal. The work in India was still under discussion in May 1890 and in 1892 looking back over 1891 India was listed among the countries about which the Mission had had 'correspondence from interested friends.'

The most positive report for 1891 was from Ceylon (Sri Lanka) about which the Secretary wrote: "This Branch, started ten months ago with only a handful, has now by the grace of God been gradually progressing that it contains now forty-two members, who profess to be on the Lord's side, most of whom are station masters on the line. Besides these there are thirty-two on the Bible and Prayer Union list."

The tone of the Mission's objectives can be gauged from the closing sentences of this report. 'Above all, we want to see Christ enthroned in the hearts and lives of many more Railway-men this year. This would be the fulfilment of our dearest desire. Workers all, let the keynote of our work for the coming year be "Souls for Jesus".'

By 1901 the work in India was developing well and the Annual Report carried a detailed account of the work on the East Indian Railway. Various branches contributed to the Mission's foreign missions and the report noted that £100 had been given by the Scottish branches, and the practical support of the Mission in Edinburgh was reported by Mr Pollock (see below). The relevant section of the report is as follows:

'INDIA.

Mr. Thomas Pollock, who is at work as Railway Missionary on the East Indian Railway, has been engaged during the year in visiting the various stations on that important system for the purpose of conducting services for the Railway people, who have very few opportunities of hearing the Gospel.

Mr. Pollock reports :—

"The work has been the preaching of the Gospel, the establishing of regular meetings for prayer and Bible study, the advocating of temperance, and the helping of Christians in the Divine life.

"At most of the important stations on the line an Institute is to be found which does duty for all kinds of functions, and in these places the services have largely been held; where no such building offered, the meetings have been held in waiting-rooms, bungalows, etc.

“The attendance at these services has been most encouraging. The people are grateful for the opportunity of worship, and respond to the invitation in a way which is altogether cheering.

“From most places one departs wishing that it were possible to visit the same station again the following week, but alas, other places have equal claims, and it may be several weeks have to elapse before another visit can be paid.

“We feel that more definite work might be done if we could make a longer stay at some of the places, but as the Institutes could not be obtained for more than one night at a time there would be difficulty in having more services unless we had a tent for this purpose.

Work of Year.

“During the year 11,243 miles were travelled by rail; 126 meetings held with an aggregate attendance of 2518, not inclusive of Jamalpur Sabbath School work.

Sunday Schools

“At a number of stations on the line friends are carrying on Sunday Schools, and it has been our privilege to help and encourage such effort by addressing the children and supplying material for the work.

Temperance

“This subject has been kept well to the front of our work, and quite a number of pledges have been secured during the year. The ravages of drink are great, and we feel that the question must receive greater attention than ever.

Colportage

“While we have not yet succeeded in employing a permanent Colporteur as we had hoped, we have had the occasional services of one locally, and on the whole a fair business was done during the year, the turnover being Rs 509.

Literature

“*The Railway Signal*. There are about 200 subscribers to this paper along the lines, and we believe it is finding more favour with the people.

“*Monthly Messenger*. This four page leaflet continues to be disseminated and our grateful thanks are due first to the East Indian Railway Company for conveying the packets to the respective stations free of charge, and also to the many kind friends at these stations who arrange for the distribution of the papers.

Special Missions

“Packets of literature, etc., have also been sent out to the platelayers and others at the more isolated stations on the line.

“In the early part of the year the Rev. C. A. R. Janvier, of Allahabad, conducted a Special Mission in Jamalpur when the Masonic Hall was kindly placed at our disposal. The meetings were largely attended, and great profit and blessing was the result. A series of children’s services were also held at that time.

Work amongst the Indian Staff

“This part of the work we greatly desire to extend, and are arranging for a Native Worker commencing it at an early date. We have frequently made use of a Christian brother in the preaching of the Gospel to Indian Staff, and he has made several trips on the line with this object. A wide field of work is presented to us here, and in taking it up we would be doing pioneer work. [*This seems to confirm that the Mission was primarily active among European employees*]

Magic Lantern

“A beautiful lantern, the gift of friends in Edinburgh, has proved quite an acquisition to the work, and some profitable gatherings have been held with it.” ‘

The minutes of February 18, 1903 show that the Committee had granted Mr Pollock Rs 8 per month for ‘native servants’ wages’. It is not clear what these ‘native servants’ were employed as; they could have been simply domestic servants or working for the Mission, I suspect the former.

In 1907 there were thoughts of sending an additional missionary to India although a decision was postponed at the February 13 Committee meeting.

As noted various branches of the Railway Mission in the United Kingdom supported the work in India and other international work and reports of their interest were included in the ‘Lights along the Line’ section of the *Railway Signal*, e.g. Boston, Lincolnshire in the March 1909 edition.

There was apparently a limit to what the Mission could consider taking on and in February 1913 a request for a railway missionary to South India was to be referred to the Anglo India Evangelisation Society.

I have not yet discovered specific reports of the work in India after 1913 and at this stage I cannot make further comment other than to observe that in respect to that part of Asia only Ceylon is referred to in the Annual Report for 1928. This is the most comprehensive list of Railway Mission Branches and there is no reference to India. I wonder if the Mission’s work into India had been transferred to other missionary societies by this time. There is much more research to be carried out.

Miscellaneous Notes

I would add the following notes which may be of interest.

YMCA

The American YMCA had an extensive work among railway employees in the United States but it also worked in other countries and sometimes was in competition with the Railway Mission. The next quote is from a website that has a history of the YMCA’s Transportation Department. It reads:

‘At the turn of the century the American model for railroad work was experimented with abroad. The first attempt in Japan between 1891-1893 was unsuccessful, but in 1892 a railroad association was established in **Coimbatore, India**. On the success of India invitations came from Great Britain and France to advise on American applications. Work was also done in Russia and an association was established in Mexico City in 1902, with an American secretary.’

<http://special.lib.umn.edu/findaid/html/ymca/yusa0032.phtml> (accessed 01/01/14)

[**Comments:** *The Railway Mission’s in Japan lasted until 1941, but I have not investigated how long the YMCA work among railway employees in India continued.*]

Jamalpur, Bihar

There appears to have been a strong Christian influence in this railway town which still continues.

Nitin Sinha of the Institute of the Railway Studies & Transport History, York gave a paper entitled 'Skill formation and work culture in an Indian railway town of Jamalpur, 1860s-1940s' at York on January 16, 2013. There were just one or two points relevant to our history of missions to railwaymen. This was part of his academic research on cultural history through work. In course of his talk he did mention religious influences.

The town was divided between: Resident and immigrant Europeans, Anglo-Indians, Bengalis (clerical staff) and Local workers living within 20 miles of the town.

In 1927 a special class railway apprenticeship was introduced which was for four years; the top six among these apprentices were sent to workshops in the United Kingdom. These were sometimes referred to as 'brown sahibs'.

[Comment: I wonder whether any of these had contact with Christians in the UK and perhaps became Christians while they were there. British railwaymen also travelled to India where they worked for varying periods, and the Railway Mission encouraged Christian railwaymen to act as missionaries, but I have not seen specific examples for India.]

During thirty years of rapid development in the early history some four churches were established.

Recreation was aimed at self improvement with 'religious moralising' that was linked to the work culture.

The railway company paid for the clergy with the aim of 'keeping the soul pure'.

What were racial divisions are now the class divisions of the town.

I made contact with him after the talk and he included the following comments in his email:

"Jamalpur was also a very popular place for many of the Indian social reform movements. It had branches of Arya Samaj and other Hindu organisations.

Immediately from the top of my head I can think of one source where you can get more on the activities of the Mission in Jamalpur. These would be newspapers. I have heard that the Times of India has digitised its archive."

Catholic influence

There now appears to be a strong Roman Catholic presence in the town, for example the Notre Dame School.

'History of Notre Dame

Notre Dame Academy is a Catholic institution and all its activities find their source in Christian Philosophy. Founded by St. Julie Billiart in France in 1804, the Sisters of Notre Dame follow the charismatic spirit of St. Julie marked by simplicity of vision and joy in communication to the people, the goodness of God. Notre Dame means 'our Lady' in French. Our Lady is Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Notre Dame Academy is under the maternal guidance and protection of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Imbued by the Charism of St. Julie, the Sisters of Notre Dame have established foundations throughout the world. They give witness to God's love by involvement in various educational, social and medical services in India, Belgium, Korea, Germany, Brazil, England, Indonesia, Italy, Papua New Guinea, Holland, the United States and Africa.

The first Notre Dame School in India was established **in Jamalpur, Bihar in 1949** and then in Patna in 1960. Other Notre Dame Schools can be found in West Bengal, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jammu and Kashmir and with numerous schools in Bihar.'

<http://notredameacademy.in/school/history-of-notre-dame> (accessed 24/02/14)

Conclusion

As you can see there are many months and years of research to be done and this can only give a very small taste of what material may exist. What is clear is that as with the Railway Mission in the UK there were many other organisations, including churches, that ministered especially to railway people. Whilst the Mission played a part it is likely to have been a very small part in spreading the Gospel in India.

Dudley Clark

Archivist and Historian of the Railway Mission

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