



Research paper

Missionaries, Converts, and Zamindars: The Formation and Development of the Baptist Church Community in Barishal, c. 1828–1971

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ABSTRACT

This article reconstructs the formation and early development of the Baptist Christian community of Barishal district, one of the earliest sites of sustained Protestant conversion in what is now Bangladesh. It argues that the community emerged not from missionary evangelism transplanted from Serampore, but from a contested interaction between foreign missionaries, Bengali evangelists, a pre-existing heterodox devotional movement, and the coercive structures of the zamindari system. The study uses an archival-documentary method, cross-reading missionary records, a contemporary statistical directory, and Bengali-language congregational and denominational histories. It traces the mission's institutional origins in 1828–29, its rapid rural expansion after an indigenous religious leader's conversion in 1846, and its consolidation into a largely indigenous-led institution across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Baptist Sangha records document a marked decline in dependence on foreign funding between 1960 and 1970, and a recent account of one landlord assault extends the analysis of anti-convert violence to its gendered dimension. The findings indicate that indigenous religious agency, rather than missionary initiative, drove the community's decisive growth. They also show that institutional self-governance was slower and more contested than conversion itself, and that landlord hostility is better explained as a structurally predictable defence of agrarian authority than as an isolated instance of religious antagonism. The article offers a cross-denominational synthesis of an otherwise fragmented historiography and identifies the archival gaps that still limit confidence in the community's mid-twentieth-century trajectory, with implications for the study of subaltern conversion and mission-colonial power in South Asia.

1. Introduction

Barishal, a riverine district in the southern delta of Bengal, occupies a distinctive place in the history of Protestant Christianity in South Asia. While Catholic settlement in the region dated from the eighteenth century, sustained Protestant missionary activity began only in 1828–29, when the Serampore Baptist fraternity dispatched Reverend John Smith to the district town (Ali, 1965). Within two decades, this modest beginning had produced one of the most numerically significant rural Protestant communities in eastern Bengal, a development that owed less to the strategic planning of the Serampore mission than to the conversion, in 1846, of a local religious leader

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named Kangali Mohanta, whose following within the heterodox Karta Bhaja movement provided the social base for mass conversion in the villages north of Barishal town (Ali, 1965). By 1850 the Barishal mission counted ten stations under Reverend J. C. Page, with 181 church members and a wider Christian community of over a thousand persons; by 1900 the Baptist Mission alone reported forty-six churches and 2,215 members spread across some sixty-five villages (Modak, 1900).

This trajectory raises three interlocking questions that organise the analysis which follows. First, how did the Baptist mission in Barishal move from an initially slow and unremarkable beginning (1828–1846) to rapid rural expansion after 1846, and what role did indigenous religious networks play in this transition? Second, to what extent can the resulting Christian community be understood as the product of indigenous agency rather than missionary imposition, given that its principal catalyst was a Bengali religious leader operating within an existing devotional tradition? Third, how did the region's agrarian power structure, the zamindari and taluqdari system, shape the experience of conversion, and what does the pattern of landlord violence against converts reveal about the relationship between religious change and rural social conflict in colonial Bengal?

The remainder of the article addresses these three questions in turn, first through a review of the fragmented historiography bearing on Barishal (Section 1.1) and the theoretical and methodological commitments that follow from it (Section 2), and then through the historical and analytical account itself (Section 3). The analysis concentrates on the period 1828–1919. Section 3.10 extends the account, on the basis of a later institutional source, to the Sangha's financial self-governance between the 1920s and 1970 and to the community's experience of the 1971 Liberation War; these later findings inform the discussion of indigenous agency but fall outside the article's core period.

1.1 Prior Scholarship and Sources

The historiography bearing directly on Barishal's Christian community is thin and unevenly distributed across genres. The most substantial scholarly treatment remains Mohar Ali's *The Bengali Reaction to Christian Missionary Activities, 1833–1857*, a doctoral thesis completed at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, and published in 1965 (Ali, 1965). Ali's study is not a history of the Barishal mission as such, but an analysis of Bengali and specifically landlord responses to conversion across several districts, of which Barishal furnishes his most extended case study. Its value lies in its close engagement with archival material: Baptist Missionary Society records, the *Calcutta Christian Observer*, the *Missionary Herald*, Bengal Judicial Consultations, and crucially two Bengali-language manuscript histories held in the BMS Archives, John Sarkar's *Bakharganja Mandalir Itihasa* and Srinath Sarkar's *Bakharganja Mishanadhine Mandaliganer Itihasa* (1890) (Ali, 1965). These manuscripts, composed by native Baptist chroniclers within a generation of the events they describe, were known to later scholarship only through Ali's citations. Their subsequent fate is addressed directly below.

A further body of evidence is Komal Sarkar's *Purabritta*: a 358-page congregational history compiled by a lay member of the Barishal Baptist community, published by the Baptist Memorial Church community in Barishal in 1998. Its fifteen chapters cover the town congregation's founding (1905), pre-1846 mission history, the Memorial Church's construction, a chronological register of missionaries and lay workers, neighbourhood-

level convert genealogies, affiliated societies, and, uniquely among the sources available to this study, a chapter on the community's experience of the 1971 Liberation War.

The postscript of *Purabritta* resolves the question of the John Sarkar and Srinath Sarkar manuscripts' survival. Komal Sarkar's own account (K. Sarkar, 1998) identifies him as the grandson of Rev. Srinath Sarkar and narrates a documented, fifteen-year search for his grandfather's manuscript: a letter of 3 February 1991 from Professor Dilip Pandit directed him to the Baptist Missionary Society Archives (reference "Box India, Barisal, 184/1847"); a subsequent approach through Regent's Park College, Oxford, initially reported the manuscript untraceable and raised the possibility that it had been destroyed in a Second World War bombing of the B.M.S. library; but a letter of 5 June 1992 from the Society's archivist, Liz Doull, via the librarian Mrs. S. T. Mills, reports that the manuscript had in fact been located in another box, photocopied, and forwarded, together with a companion account by Rev. John Sarkar, via Rev. Martin Auch, reaching Sarkar in November 1992, to Sarkar's own surprise. Both manuscripts should therefore be treated as extant in the BMS Archives and, in copied form, reproduced within *Purabritta*'s later chapters (K. Sarkar, 1998).

A second body of evidence is statistical and directory literature produced by the missionary establishment itself. S. Modak's *Directory of Protestant Indian Christians* (1900), examined here directly in full, provides a district-level census of the Barishal Baptist Mission's church membership, school enrolment, and the names of the indigenous pastors and evangelists then serving each village congregation, of a kind rarely available for other districts in comparable detail (Modak, 1900). Comparable but less directly useful is the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society's promotional pamphlet *The Bengal-Orissa Mission* (1918), which, despite its title's suggestion of regional coverage, in fact concerns a wholly separate American Baptist field in Midnapore and Balasore and contains no reference to Barishal at all (American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, 1918), a fact worth noting because it clarifies that the Barishal mission belonged to the British-based Baptist Missionary Society (Serampore) tradition rather than to the American Baptist network, a distinction sometimes blurred in later popular writing. Edmund F. Merriam's institutional history, *A History of American Baptist Missions* (1913), examined in full, contains no mention of Barishal whatsoever, confirming the same institutional separation (Merriam, 1913).

A third layer of evidence consists of locally compiled Bangladeshi Christian historiography, most notably the synthetic narrative associated with James Tejosh Shankar Das's *Two Hundred Years of Christianity in Bangladesh and After* (2016), which draws on denominational records, the Bangladesh Baptist Sangha's institutional memory, and earlier Bengali-language church histories to reconstruct the later, twentieth-century phase of the mission, the tenure of William Carey III (1891–1919), the founding of lay organisations such as the Udyog Samiti (1894) and the Sebok Samiti (1898), and the establishment of the Baptist Missionary School (1914). Because this material has not been independently verified against primary archival sources, it is treated here as secondary testimony rather than as archivally confirmed fact.

Three historiographical gaps remain. First, existing accounts are overwhelmingly missionary or landlord-centred; the voice and interior religious experience of the converts themselves survive only in fragments, depositions taken after the Baropakhya kidnappings and brief missionary paraphrases of convert testimony filtered through colonial legal and missionary record-keeping (Underhill, 1856; Ali, 1965), a gap only partially narrowed by the named victims and gendered detail in Banerjee's (2024) recent account, discussed in Section 3.6. Second, the relationship between the Karta Bhaja movement and Christian conversion, arguably the single most important causal factor in Barishal's mission history, has received more sustained attention in the wider historiography of

Bengali heterodox religion than Mohar Ali's brief treatment alone suggests: G. A. Oddie's (1995) study of Kartabhaja converts to evangelical Christianity in the neighbouring Krishnagar–Nadia region provides the closest existing analogue, arguing that pre-existing devotional affinities and an "intellectualist" receptivity to Christian doctrine predisposed Kartabhaja adherents toward conversion. Oddie's analysis, however, concentrates on Krishnagar and does not extend to Barishal, so the mechanism of Kangali Mohanta's specific following remains, to this author's knowledge, unexamined within that broader literature, a gap Section 3.2 begins to address (Ali, 1965; Oddie, 1995). Third, the historiography remains geographically and denominationally fragmented: American Baptist mission records (Merriam), British Baptist Missionary Society records (embedded in Mohar Ali), and native Bangladeshi Baptist historiography (Das and related compilations) have not been brought into sustained conversation with one another, in part because they were produced for different institutional audiences and at different times. This article's contribution is modest but specific: it cross-reads Mohar Ali's archivally grounded account against the statistical record in Modak's Directory and against the later synthetic Bangladeshi narrative, in order to construct a fuller, though still incomplete, chronological and analytical account of the Barishal community's history.

2. Data and Methodology

2.1 Theoretical Framework

This article draws primarily on two interpretive frameworks. The first is *indigenous agency* within mission studies, which cautions against narrating conversion as something done *to* a passive population by external missionary actors. This perspective was most influentially developed by Sanneh (1989), who argued that the vernacular translation of Christian scripture and doctrine placed converts, rather than foreign missionaries, at the centre of religious change across the non-Western world, and it was specifically extended to Bengali Kartabhaja conversion by Oddie (1995). Agency in this sense operates at two levels. At the level of initiative, the decisive expansion of Christianity after 1846 was not the result of an intensified missionary campaign but of the conversion of a single indigenous religious leader, Kangali Mohanta, whose subsequent preaching, not that of the resident missionary, produced roughly three hundred baptisms within a few months (J. Sarkar, 1847). At the level of religious practice, conversion in Barishal did not entail a clean substitution of one belief system for another: the 1841 encounter between Berreau and Kangali Mohanta at Gournadi shows existing Karta Bhaja devotional vocabulary, kinship networks, and social organisation being carried into, and absorbed by, the emerging Baptist congregations, rather than displaced by them. The mission's own station-keeping records, in other words, describe a movement led substantially by a Bengali evangelist operating through pre-existing social and devotional networks, with the resident missionary (initially Sylvester Berreau, later J. C. Page) playing a supporting and administrative rather than an initiating role.

The second framework concerns *caste, class, and agrarian power*. Converts in north Barishal were drawn overwhelmingly from low-caste cultivating groups who stood in a relation of dependence to Hindu zamindars and taluqdars (Ali, 1965). Ranajit Guha's (1983) account of the structures of dominance and subordination binding the colonial Indian peasant to landlord authority offers a general theoretical anchor here: conversion, on this reading, altered not merely religious identity but a subordinate's position within an inherited hierarchy of deference, rent, and labour obligation. Converts who acquired literacy, missionary patronage, and access to the colonial courts became correspondingly less pliable as rent-paying dependents. Reverend Page's own

1855 analysis, delivered to the General Conference of Bengal Protestant Missionaries, made this connection explicit, arguing that the zamindar's "personal interest," "religious interest," and material interest in his tenantry were all threatened by conversion (Page, 1855).

Read together, these two frameworks suggest that the Barishal Baptist community is best understood neither as a missionary success story nor as a simple record of colonial coercion, but as the outcome of a native religious movement that reconfigured, and was in turn reshaped by, the agrarian power structure of the Bengal delta. The two frameworks are not fully reconciled here: whether converts were drawn primarily by devotional affinity or by the material prospect of escaping zamindari dependence cannot be settled from the surviving evidence, and the two motives were in practice difficult for contemporaries, and remain difficult for this article, to disentangle. Taken jointly, the frameworks dictate the evidentiary strategy adopted below: because the central claim concerns who acted upon whom, the methodology that follows privileges sources that can distinguish missionary initiative from indigenous initiative in the documentary record itself, rather than relying on any single institutional vantage point.

2.2 Sources and Method

This article is based on a combination of primary and secondary sources, read and compared against one another using standard historical method. The most important primary sources are two Bengali-language manuscript histories, John Sarkar's *Bakharganja Mandalir Itihasa* and Srinath Sarkar's *Bakharganja Mishanadhine Mandaliganer Itihasa* (1890), both written by native Baptist chroniclers close to the events they describe. These manuscripts, together with Komal Sarkar's *Purabritta* (1998), form the primary documentary core of this article. *Purabritta* is, on its own terms, the single most important source: its author was not a foreign missionary but a Barishal-born Christian layman who served for many years as an unpaid assistant pastor of the Barishal Baptist congregation, giving him direct, lifelong access to the community's records, oral traditions, and surviving elders.

The article draws on several further primary and secondary sources to build a fuller and more reliable account. S. Modak's *Directory of Protestant Indian Christians* (1900) supplies a contemporary statistical record of the mission, examined here in full. Rajendranath Baroi's *Byaptisto Sangher Itihas* (1984) and Mathura Nath's *Bange Khrishtha-Mandali* (1892) add institutional detail for the twentieth century. Mohar Ali's 1965 monograph, which draws on a wide range of archival material, Baptist Missionary Society records, the *Calcutta Christian Observer*, the *Missionary Herald*, and Bengal Judicial Consultations, is used as a secondary historical interpretation alongside these primary sources. Finally, a body of published academic literature on Bengali heterodox religion, missionary education, and the agrarian structure of colonial Bengal is used to situate the archival findings within wider scholarly debates.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1 Historical Background

Barishal, historically known as Chandradwip or Bakla, lies near the outer edge of the Gangetic delta. It was declared a separate district in 1797. Its headquarters moved from Bakerganj town to the present city of Barishal in 1801. The district had a dense agrarian population. It also had an unusually intricate riverine geography

of khals, jheels, and seasonally flooded lowlands, known as bil tracts. This geography shaped both settlement patterns and the practical logistics of missionary touring.

European Christian settlement in the wider district dated to Portuguese trading and missionary activity from the sixteenth century. It was concentrated in the southern sub-region around Padrishibpur, and it produced a small but long-established Catholic community. Protestant missionary activity arrived considerably later. It concentrated in the district town and its northern hinterland. According to the Serampore mission's own account, William Carey directed Reverend John Smith to take up the Barishal station in November 1829. This followed an invitation from the district magistrate, Mr. Garrett, who himself received baptism, reportedly performed publicly in a Barishal tank around 1830.

Smith's early efforts concentrated on education. He is credited with founding four schools offering instruction in English, Persian, Bengali, and Sanskrit. He also served as the first headmaster of what later became Barishal Zilla School, a post his Baptist successor held as well, before the school passed into government hands in 1853. This pattern was not peculiar to Barishal. Laird's (1968) study of Serampore's wider educational programme shows that the fraternity's mission stations across Bengal, from Dhaka and Chittagong in the east to Suri in the west, followed a broadly similar sequence: vernacular and English-medium schooling came first, sustained evangelistic success came later, and by 1818 the mission had opened well over a hundred elementary schools. Smith's Barishal schools should accordingly be read as a provincial instance of a mission-wide strategy, not a locally improvised one (Laird, 1968). Komal Sarkar records that a Bengali evangelist, Bishwanath, was appointed in 1830 as Smith's preaching assistant (K. Sarkar, 1998). Despite this institutional foothold, the mission's evangelistic progress up to the mid-1840s remained, in Mohar Ali's phrase, "very slow" (Ali, 1965, p. 149).

Sarkar preserves what appears to be the earliest surviving first-hand description of the Barishal mission station. It is embedded in John Sarkar's own manuscript account. In January 1833, a Serampore-appointed preacher was travelling by boat with a Mr. Litchman, whose wife was seeking a change of climate. They anchored for a Saturday night at the "Judge Sahib's Ghat" in Barishal town. The following Sunday morning, a young Christian, Mohan Thakur, came to bathe at the same ghat. In conversation, he revealed that a Baptist chapel already stood nearby, under the charge of a Mr. Berreau, whom the traveller recognised from Serampore. The traveller went ashore and conducted that evening's worship. He learned that Mohan Thakur's own household, and those of his elder brother Panchu Saha and one Manindra, lay at Sagardi and Charamda, where a lay teacher named Mathur was already instructing them in Christian doctrine. This vignette places an organised, if modest, Christian presence at Barishal some years before Berreau's better-documented 1841 encounter with Kangali Mohanta, discussed in Section 3.2. It is consistent with a small congregation of, in Sarkar's phrase, only "a few" believers at that date (J. Sarkar, 1847).

A further dimension of the mission's early history concerns girls' and women's education in Barishal town. This developed largely separately from the rural evangelistic work described above. Sarkar records that it was Mrs. Sell, the wife of a resident missionary, who "first laid down" formal education for girls in Barishal. She began around 1849 with a handful of pupils, taught on the veranda of her own residence at Hemnagar (Bandarod). Her work was later carried forward by other missionary wives, including Mrs. Anderson and Miss A. M. Foyce.

In Sarkar's own assessment, Mrs. Sell has received disproportionately little credit in the foreign-authored historiography of the mission, relative to her local significance (K. Sarkar, 1998). Sarkar also mentions a related episode of anti-convert litigation in 1854. This appears to be a slightly earlier, or loosely remembered, reference to the same Baropakhya assault that Mohar Ali dates precisely to July 1855, based on contemporary magistrates' depositions (Ali, 1965).

A distinction obscured in most secondary accounts is worth stating explicitly. The rural mission traced above, the district-wide network of village stations expanding out of Dighalia, Dhandoba, Askar, and neighbouring settlements, was administratively and chronologically separate from a Christian congregation within Barishal town itself. Komal Sarkar's 1998 congregational history states that this town congregation was not fully organised until 1905. It was formed under William Carey III's own organisational initiative, with the support of local lay Christians including Pran Nath Sikdar, Durgakanta Chakrabarti, Miss Finn (successor to Mrs. Sell), Rev. Indunath Sarkar, Lakshmi Narayan Das (Shil), Rev. Kailash Chandra Sarkar, Sadhan Chandra Sarkar, and Ashwini Kumar Ghosh. Sarkar explains that resident missionaries, though headquartered in Barishal town from 1828 to 1829 onward, directed their evangelistic effort chiefly toward the bil (wetland) tracts of the Barishal-Faridpur lowlands. As a result, a formally constituted town congregation lagged more than seven decades behind the rural stations it administratively oversaw (K. Sarkar, 1998).

3.2 Sylvester Berreau, the Karta Bhaja Movement, and the Conversion of Kangali Mohanta

The turning point in the mission's history came with the appointment of Sylvester Berreau. He was a missionary of Catholic Chittagonian background who had himself converted and trained at Serampore. He worked alongside Smith, and eventually succeeded him, in the villages north of Barishal town. Sarkar, drawing on Rev. P. K. Barkway's account, adds biographical detail unavailable in Mohar Ali. Berreau was born into a Roman Catholic family in Chittagong. He was educated at a Baptist mission school there, baptised as a young man, and sent to Serampore for theological training in 1827. He joined Smith at Barishal roughly four years after Smith's own 1829 arrival. On Sarkar's account, this appointment followed a period in government service that Berreau found unsatisfying. In the same period the resident magistrate, Mr. Garrett, was baptised. Sarkar gives the precise date as 14 November 1830, in a Barishal pond, publicly, by the Dhaka missionary Rev. Leonard. The event was witnessed and reported by Garrett's own deputy, or naib, Mr. Parry, himself a native of Suri in Birbhum district (Barkway, n.d., as cited in K. Sarkar, 1998). Berreau established preaching bases at Chandshi and Dighalia. He extended evangelistic touring into villages such as Dhandoba, Askar, Suagram, and Chhabikharpar. In 1841, while preaching at Gournadi, Berreau encountered Kangali Mohanta, the leader of a local branch of the Karta Bhaja sect. This was a nineteenth-century Bengali devotional movement centred on the worship of a formless "True God." As at Krishnagar in the same period, its adherents showed unusual receptivity to Christian preaching.

The manuscript histories of John Sarkar and Srinath Sarkar record that Kangali Mohanta embraced Christianity in 1846 and "started a movement in favour of that religion." Roughly three hundred baptisms followed within a few months, and chapels were established at Dhandoba, Askar, Suagram, Chhabikharpar, and Dighalia (J. Sarkar, 1847; S. Sarkar, 1890). The Barishal mission's decisive growth phase was therefore driven by an indigenous convert's evangelism among his own religious following, not by an intensified programme of missionary preaching. A closely comparable pattern occurred at the same time among the Krishnagar Karta Bhajas

in neighbouring Nadia district. Oddie (1995) analyses that movement in detail and argues that it, too, was driven substantially by pre-existing doctrinal affinity rather than missionary persuasion. The two movements may have been connected through shared Karta Bhaja networks, though this article cannot confirm a direct link.

3.3 Formation of Early Congregations, 1846–1856

The rapid growth of converts necessitated the construction of chapels. Berreau established the region's first purpose-built place of worship, a thatched-roof structure, at Dhandoba. By 1856 at least ten organised congregations existed, including Ambari, Chaurkhuli, Narikelbari, Chandshi, and Dakshinpar. John Sarkar's manuscript likens the response of local zamindars to that of the biblical Pharaoh confronting the Israelites. Landlords feared that converts "allied with the Sahebs" would erode zamindari and taluqdari authority, and they began a sustained campaign of harassment against the new Christian villages (J. Sarkar, 1847). Berreau himself did not remain to see this consolidation through. He was compelled to leave the Baptist mission after allegations of adultery were substantiated. Pastoral oversight of the native Christians then passed to the indigenous evangelist John Sarkar during the resulting interregnum. The mission's statistical returns for 1850 recorded ten stations, 181 church members, and a wider Christian community of 1,025 persons, under the newly arrived missionary John Chamberlain Page. Page had taken charge of the Barishal field in 1848, after service in the Twenty-Four Parganas (Ali, 1965).

3.4 The Barishal Town Congregation and the Memorial Church, 1901–1919

Sarkar situates the belated formation of the Barishal town congregation within a specific urban transformation. Bakerganj port was founded under Agha Baker in 1740. The district headquarters moved from there to Barishal town in 1801, progressively concentrating courts and offices in the town. By the early twentieth century, the substantial workforce of the Rivers Steam Navigation and India General Navigation companies' steamer works had also settled there, drawing in Christian workers and others from the surrounding villages and rural mission stations. Missionaries judged that the existing rural station at Bhatarpol, however extensive, would not remain a suitable base as the town's Christian population grew. This prompted the 1905 organisation of a dedicated town congregation. Land for the mission compound was obtained through government requisition. The terms required the mission to return the land if the steamer company later needed it, an undertaking the mission did not in the event honour.

William Carey III then undertook to replace the existing small chapel with a larger, permanent church. According to Professor Dilip Pandit's (1985) *Bangladeshe Christiya Mandalir Itihas*, as cited in Sarkar, Carey arrived in India in 1884 and took charge of the Barishal station in 1891. He served twenty-eight years, until his 1919 departure. In this capacity, he commissioned a local Christian carpenter to build a scale wooden model of a church in an indigenous architectural idiom. He then travelled to the United States to raise the construction cost. When funds still fell short, he travelled on to Australia. On his return, he gathered the congregation and preached on Matthew 28:19–20, calling on members of every station to take part personally in the building work, so that the church would be felt to belong to the whole community. Sarkar records that elderly members still living at the time of writing recalled taking part as children. One woman, too young to carry a full brick, was given a broken fragment by Carey himself, so that she too could contribute.

The resulting building, the Memorial Church, was sited deliberately on the town's main thoroughfare for visibility. It was completed with an adjoining masonry ghat on the Chandmari canal, built expressly to allow

public believer's baptism by immersion as a visible testimony of faith to passers-by. Its construction illustrates a dimension of this period distinct from the landlord conflicts discussed below: an indigenous congregation in the district's principal town asserting a permanent, visible civic presence through voluntary collective labour, at the same moment that rural converts elsewhere in the district were contesting zamindari authority through the colonial courts (K. Sarkar, 1998).

3.5 Landlord Violence and the Limits of Missionary Protection

The expansion of the Christian community provoked a sustained, and at times violent, reaction from the zamindars and taluqdars of north Barishal. Mohar Ali situates this pattern within a wider colonial-Bengal phenomenon, also documented at Krishnagar and Jessore (Ali, 1965).

The first serious incident occurred in March 1847 at Dighalia. A convert refused to pay a wedding levy demanded by the zamindar of Kotalipara. This prompted an attack by the landlord's lathials, or armed retainers, who plundered Christian households and drove roughly twenty-nine persons from the village. The refugees found unexpected hospitality in the neighbouring Muslim village of Sitaikundu (S. Sarkar, 1890; J. Sarkar, 1847). Missionaries Page, in Barishal, and Parry, in Jessore, succeeded in bringing the case before the Jessore magistrate, R. Hampton. He ordered restitution of land and property and extracted a bond, or *muchalka*, from the zamindar. This legal victory did not end the harassment, which continued through the villages of Bakal, Pakurta, and Sonarang (Ali, 1965).

In April 1849, two newly converted families at Jobarpar were similarly targeted. The agent of a Narail landlord seized two Christian teachers, Ramjivan and Sukhram Sarkar, and confined them in irons in the estate's *kachari*, or office, for three days. Their composure reportedly left their captors "so amazed" that the two men were eventually released. The converted families were nonetheless forced to relocate to Askar under continuing pressure (J. Sarkar, 1847).

Harassment continued with varying intensity through 1850 to 1853. Page recorded one case in detail: a Dhandoba convert faced escalating legal and physical persecution, including threatened eviction, a forged debt receipt, and a summary ejectment suit. He was finally arrested and beaten, and was rescued only through Page's personal intervention (Ali, 1965). Page further reported that Barishal zamindars held coordinated meetings in 1852 and 1853 "to make a united and daring attempt to rid the zillah of the odious Christians." This plan's apparent culmination was the assault on the Christians of Baropakhya in July 1855 (Ali, 1965, p. 160).

3.6 The Baropakhya Case, 1855–1857

The Baropakhya incident represents the single best-documented episode of anti-convert violence in the Barishal mission's history. It merits detailed treatment. On the night of Sunday, 1 July 1855, an armed mob attacked the small Christian community at Baropakhya, a village roughly twenty miles north of Barishal town, within the zamindari of Edward Brown and the taluqdars Mohan and Nandakumar Munshi of Goila. Fourteen persons were abducted: five men, two boys, six women (one elderly and infirm, one in advanced pregnancy), and one small child. They were bound, beaten, and held captive in a cowshed at Mollapara. They were then divided into smaller groups and moved repeatedly among boats, jungles, and marshes for a fortnight, to evade recovery.

One captive, Ledoo, described as among the first Baropakhya converts, was reportedly singled out for particular torture (Ali, 1965).

A recent secondary account by the historian Mou Banerjee draws on the same magistrates' depositions Ali summarises, and adds detail, including a gendered dimension largely absent from Ali's institutional narrative. Banerjee names several of the fourteen captives beyond Ledoo: his pregnant wife Roso; the convert Janoo, his wife Gouri, their young son Hridoy, and Janoo's sister-in-law; and the convert Ramakrishna, his two brothers, mother, and grandmother. Contemporary depositions describe the women, including Roso and Gouri, only as "assaulted" and "carried away." Banerjee reports that they were stripped and beaten, and were probably subjected to sexual violence that period sources lacked any vocabulary to name directly. Elizabeth Kolsky's work on rape trials in early colonial India identifies this silence as characteristic of the colonial judicial record more broadly (Banerjee, 2024; Kolsky, 2010). Banerjee also cites the district's former settlement officer, J. C. Jack, who judged that conversions at Baropakhya and neighbouring Gournadi had occurred "largely in a spirit of revolt against caste-bondage and zamindari oppression." This characterisation anticipates, from an official colonial vantage point, the agrarian-power explanation this article develops independently in Section 3.7. Banerjee further notes that some years later a young deputy magistrate of Khulna, investigating related harassment near Baropakhya, was the novelist Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Citing Henry Beveridge's gazetteer, Banerjee observes that by 1855 Bakarganj, with roughly 6,500 Indian Christians out of a population of 2.5 million, held more Christian converts than any Bengal district except Nadia and the 24 Parganas (Banerjee, 2024, citing Beveridge, 1876).

Page brought the case before the district magistrate, E. C. Craster. Craster's search orders eventually secured the captives' recovery in mid-August 1855, though the missionaries suspected collusion between local police officers and the perpetrators (Ali, 1965). Craster personally inspected the village on 19 October and ordered the restoration of Christian households. On 28 November, he sentenced five defendants to six months' imprisonment. The Sessions Judge, J. B. Kemp, reversed this conviction on appeal in January 1856, citing evidentiary discrepancies. This prompted the Baptist Missionary Society's London secretary, E. B. Underhill, then touring Bengal, to prepare a detailed pamphlet, *The Case of the Baropakhya Christians, Zilla Backergunge*, which he submitted to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal in July 1856 (Ali, 1965). The matter was then referred to the Sadr Court. Three judges concluded there, in October 1856, that the Sessions Judge's acquittal had been mistaken. This finding was communicated to Kemp in terms serious enough that the Lieutenant Governor initially sought his transfer. The Government of India itself overturned that order, reasoning that an error of judgement did not warrant a punitive transfer that might compromise judicial independence (Ali, 1965). The wrong done to the Baropakhya Christians thus went formally unremedied, even as the case drew official attention in Calcutta, London, and, through parliamentary and mission-society channels, beyond.

Disputes between converts and landlords continued through 1856 to 1858. By April 1859, tensions in Goila reached a further flashpoint when two taluqdars seized and confined a Christian preacher, Madan Mohan Pushali. In an unusual reversal of the pattern of one-sided victimisation, converts retaliated by attacking and plundering the taluqdars' houses to recover him (S. Sarkar, 1890; J. Sarkar, 1847). Read as a sequence, the Dighalia, Jobarpar, Dhandoba, Baropakhya, and Goila incidents show an evolving pattern. Initial legal remedy through sympathetic magistrates gradually gave way to more entrenched judicial and administrative resistance. Converts themselves moved, by 1859, from passive endurance toward organised self-defence.

3.7 Explaining Landlord Hostility: Zamindars and the Missionaries

Page's 1855 paper to the General Conference of Bengal Protestant Missionaries offers the fullest contemporary missionary analysis of why Barishal's landlords responded to conversion with such consistent hostility. Mohar Ali builds his broader interpretive chapter substantially around it (Page, 1855). Three distinct interests were at stake.

The first was a personal or status interest. A zamindar's absolute authority over his tenantry was symbolically undermined once converts began to defer instead to the Christian teacher. Over time, the teacher acquired an "ascendancy in the minds of many" hearers, comparable to that of the landlord himself (Page, 1855). The second was a religious interest. Because the great majority of Barishal zamindars were themselves Hindu, the conversion of dependent rayats represented a visible erosion of religious as well as social authority. The third, and most concrete, was a material interest. Converts who gained missionary patronage and access to colonial courts became less tractable as rent-paying and labour-obligated dependents. They were also more capable of resisting arbitrary exactions of the kind that had triggered the Dighalia violence in 1847.

This analysis situates the Barishal violence not as an aberrant instance of religious bigotry, but as a structurally predictable response. It came from an agrarian elite whose authority rested on the same forms of dependency that conversion, education, and missionary legal advocacy tended to erode.

3.8 The Directory Evidence: The Mission at Century's End, c. 1900

Modak's *Directory of Protestant Indian Christians* (1900) has been examined here directly, in full, in its first (Ahmednagar) edition, rather than through Ali's secondhand quotation of it. It shows that by the turn of the century the Barishal Baptist Mission, there recorded jointly with Madaripur, had grown into a substantial rural institution.

The Directory places the entry within a wider district return. It records a total Backergunge (Barishal) population of 2,153,965, of whom 6,920 were classed as Indian Christians. Four missions were active in the district: the Baptist Mission, the S.P.G., the Australian Baptist Mission, and the Gopalgunj Independent Mission. This denominational plurality complicates any account of the district's Christian history as a purely Baptist phenomenon (Modak, 1900).

The Baptist Mission itself reported forty-six churches, with members residing in about sixty-five villages. It counted 2,215 members in total, 75 Sunday schools staffed by 90 indigenous teachers, and day schools enrolling 514 boys and 226 girls under 64 teachers. The largest single congregation was at Askar, with 380 members and a wider Christian community of 1,050, able to support its own pastor. Two smaller congregations illustrate the same pattern in more concrete form: at Baghda, the voluntarily serving pastor A. L. Sarkar led a congregation that had itself raised Rs. 100 toward a new chapel, and Dighaliya, in Madaripur district, was fully self-supporting under Pastor Mohesh Chandra Sarkar. Barisal Central Church, by contrast, had only 60 members and a wider community of 200, though the Directory describes it in its own words as "practically the mother of all the others." Figure 1 sets out the fuller village-by-village return, including Kat Hira, Indukarni, Baghda, Dhamor, Chhabikharpar, Amboliya, Dighaliya, Kaligram, Mandra, the Page Memorial Chapel at Sangram, and Narikelbari (Modak, 1900).

The Directory further records three Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour branches, at Barisal and at Pirojpur, with forty-eight district societies and 365 members in total. It separately notes that the Anglican S.P.G. (Oxford) Mission had withdrawn from Barishal some seventeen years before 1900, resuming work there only in 1895 at the urgent petition of local residents (Modak, 1900).

This granular, name-level evidence corroborates, at a fifty-year remove, the pattern already visible in Mohar Ali's account of the 1840s and 1850s: a mission substantially staffed, led, and financially sustained by indigenous Bengali Christians, rather than by resident foreign missionaries, whose numbers in Barishal remained small throughout the period.

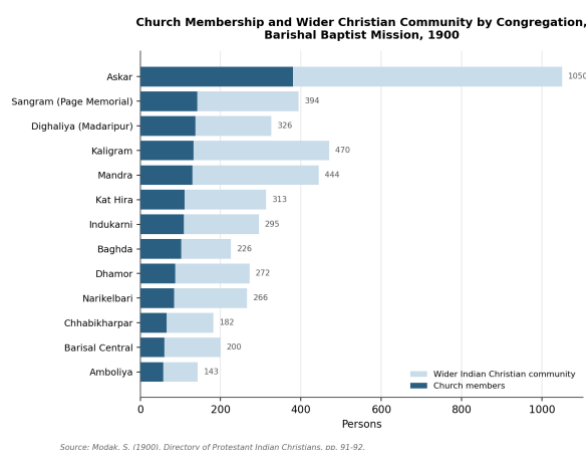


Figure 1. Church membership and wider Christian community by congregation, Barishal Baptist Mission, 1900.
Source: Modak (1900)

3.9 Institutional Consolidation under William Carey III, 1891–1919

The mission's later institutional development draws on the synthetic Bangladeshi historiography associated with Das (2016). According to this account, William Carey III arrived in India in 1884 and assumed charge of the Barishal station in 1891. He served twenty-eight years, until his 1919 departure. During his tenure, Barishal and Madaripur were administratively separated into distinct mission stations. Lay organisations also proliferated, including the Udyog Samiti, or Endeavour Society, founded in 1894 and led in part by the wife of Pranlal Sikdar, and the Sebok Samiti, or Service Society, founded in 1898, whose members undertook fasting and intensive prayer in support of the sick (Das, 2016).

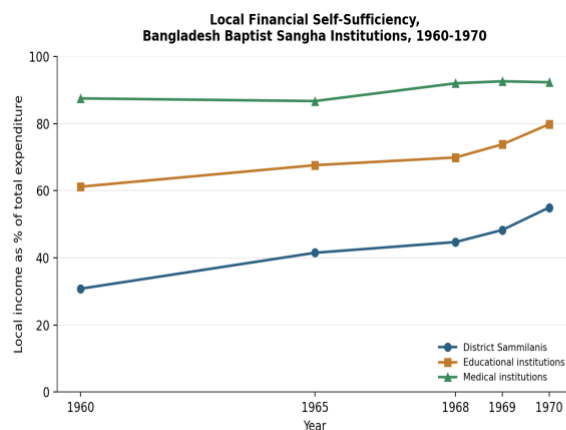
A Memorial Church was built in Barishal town in 1910, to serve migrant Christian families. Mission reports describe 1916 as the high-water mark of the Barishal Baptist Mission, with 528 new converts recorded across 262 preaching centres in a single two-month period. By 1940, the combined Barishal-Faridpur Baptist community numbered 10,726 persons, of whom 3,323 were full church members, across sixty-two congregations. These figures indicate a mission whose numerical growth continued well into the twentieth century, even as its foreign missionary staff remained minimal, consistent with the pattern of indigenous leadership already evident in Modak's 1900 Directory.

3.10 Institutional Self-Governance: The Bangladesh Baptist Sangha, 1922–1984

Rajendranath Baroi's *Byaptisto Sangher Itihas* (1984) is a Diamond Jubilee institutional history, compiled substantially from the Sangha's own bound minute books, preserved without interruption from 1932 onward, and from a serialised congregational periodical, *Manggoli*. It bears directly on the 1891–1940 and 1941–1984 periods this article has identified as its weakest. Baroi narrates the founding of a Bengal-wide Baptist Association at Serampore as early as 1842. A Khulna sammilani, or regional council, followed in 1883. The Barishal–Madaripur–Pirojpur sammilani, which encompassed the district under study, was established in 1892. A unified Bengal Baptist Sangha was then founded at Barishal in May 1922, uniting the region's local sammilanis into a single indigenous federative body. This date and venue are independently corroborated by Mathura Nath's *Bange Khrishtha-Mandali's* 1984 reprint preface, which likewise records the Sangha's formal constitution at a general representative meeting held in Barishal on 10–12 May 1922. That source also notes that the Sangha's name and territorial scope changed in stages through the 1947 Partition and 1971 independence, without altering its founding purpose (Baroi, 1984; Nath, 1892).

This indigenisation was neither instantaneous nor uncontested at the institutional level, even though this article has already shown indigenous leadership at the congregational level in Modak's 1900 Directory. Baroi's account of the Sangha's first decade describes recurring friction between the missionary establishment and the new indigenous body. The friction centred on financial support, staffing authority, and administrative jurisdiction. Many European missionaries were reluctant to see mission work pass under Sangha leadership, even as the Baptist Missionary Society progressively reduced its grants and transferred station responsibility. The Sangha's own 1929 internal review concluded that it had struggled, for want of funds and a clear division of responsibility, to manage this transfer effectively. Full administrative and financial responsibility passed to the Sangha only in 1935, following extended negotiation and a joint mission–Sangha conference at Serampore College.

This institutional narrative complicates the indigenous-agency framework developed in Section 2.1. Agency at the level of conversion, discussed in Section 3.2, was largely uncontested and indigenously driven from 1846 onward. Institutional self-governance over money, staffing, and administration was a slower, more adversarial process. It took roughly ninety years, from Serampore's 1842 Association to full Sangha control in 1935, and was still being actively renegotiated between the Pakistani and Indian branches of the Sangha as late as 1957. Baroi's figures on the financial dimension of this process are striking. District sammilanis met only 30.8% of their own expenditure from local income in 1960, rising to 55.0% by 1970. The Sangha's schools rose from 61.2% to 79.8% local self-financing over the same period. Its medical institutions, already largely self-sustaining, moved from 87.5% to 92.3% (Baroi, 1984).



Source: Bairagi, R. N. (1984). *Byapisto Sanghar itihās*, p. 42 (figures as reported in the source; the original table's underlying expenditure and income totals show minor internal print inconsistencies not resolved here).

Figure 2. Local financial self-sufficiency of Bangladesh Baptist Sangha institutions, 1960–1970. Source: Baroi (1984).

Baroi also supplies the first documented account available to this article of the Barishal Baptist community's experience of the 1971 Liberation War, an episode *Purabritta* is reported to cover but which this article has not itself examined. Baroi records that Sangha and mission staff sheltered in place through the war, rather than evacuating to India. Missionary and Sangha doctors and relief workers moved between villages in Barishal and Faridpur district, to protect and treat both Christian and non-Christian residents. Post-war reconstruction was funded through Christian Aid, the Baptist World Alliance, the World Council of Churches, and the national Christian Aid and Rehabilitation programme. This funding extended shelter, land, and resettlement assistance to displaced Hindu families in Khulna and elsewhere, a number of whom subsequently entered the Christian community. Baroi also notes the 1978 Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Ordinance as the regulatory framework under which this foreign-funded relief work was subsequently required to operate (Baroi, 1984). This account adds a twentieth-century instance of foreign missionary and Sangha resources directly shaping conversion and community formation, a dynamic this article has otherwise traced mainly for the nineteenth century.

3.11 Discussion

Three broader implications follow from this evidence. First, the Barishal case complicates any simple diffusionist model of missionary success, in which conversion spreads outward from a foreign missionary centre. The decisive growth phase of 1846 onward was catalysed by an indigenous religious leader operating through an existing devotional network, not by an intensification of missionary preaching. The resident missionary's role was substantially administrative, legal, and pastoral, rather than evangelistic in the narrow sense. This supports recent scholarship in World Christianity and mission studies, following Sanneh (1989) and, for the specifically Kartabhaja case, Oddie (1995), that treats non-Western converts as primary agents of religious change rather than as recipients of an essentially foreign product.

Second, the recurrent pattern of landlord violence in Dighalia, Jobarpar, Dhandoba, Baropakhya, and Goila cannot be adequately explained as religious bigotry alone. Page's own contemporary analysis, corroborated by the material logic of the zamindari system, situates this violence within the agrarian political economy of

colonial Bengal. Conversion threatened not merely Hindu religious solidarity, but the concrete relations of rent, deference, and dependency on which zamindari authority rested. The Barishal conflicts are therefore best read alongside, rather than separately from, the broader nineteenth-century Bengal historiography of peasant-landlord conflict, of which the roughly contemporaneous indigo disturbances form the best-known instance.

Third, this article's own evidentiary record is itself historiographically significant. Detail for 1828 to 1859 is rich, footnoted, and cross-verifiable, thanks to Mohar Ali, and is now supplemented by directly examined statistical detail for 1900, from Modak's Directory. Detail for the twentieth century remains comparatively thin, particularly for its middle decades. This asymmetry suggests that the most valuable primary evidence for Barishal's Christian history may lie precisely in sources that remain difficult for most researchers to access: the manuscript histories of John Sarkar and Srinath Sarkar, and Mathura Nath's *Bange Khrishtha-Mandali* (1892), because the only copy available to this article is a scan whose statistical tables resist confident reading. The gap has narrowed for the statistical record around 1900, and, following Baroi's (1984) institutional history discussed in Section 3.10, for the 1922 to 1970 period as well. The years between roughly 1940 and 1957 remain the article's principal remaining evidentiary weakness, rather than a reflection of the underlying historical record.

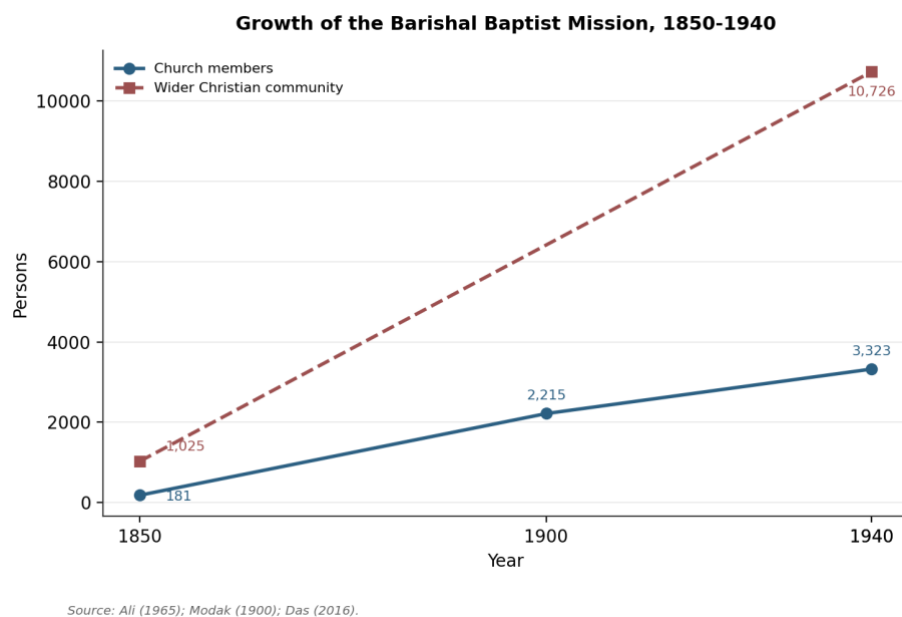


Figure 3. Growth of the Barishal Baptist Mission, 1850–1940. Sources: Ali (1965); Modak (1900); Das (2016).

A further finding bears directly on this weakness. *Purabritta*'s own bibliography names several sources not used elsewhere in the historiography consulted for this article. The most notable are Henry Beveridge's colonial gazetteer, *The District of Bakerganj: Its History and Statistics* (1876), and Rev. D. S. Wells's institutional history, *150 Years B.M.S. Report (1792–1942)* (K. Sarkar, 1998, pp. 281–282). Neither has been independently examined here. The Wells report, however, spans precisely the 1891 to 1940 window this article identifies as its weakest point, and represents the most promising concrete lead for closing that gap in future research, alongside Harold Bridges's *The Kingdom of Christ in East Bengal*. The same bibliography settles two further points. It gives Barkway's account the working title *Bôṅgīya Khrīṣṭīya Maṇḍalīr Itihāsa*, and confirms Pandit's title as *Bangladeshe Christiya Mandalir Itihas*. It also corroborates, via a documented 1990–1992 correspondence with

the BMS Archives reproduced in *Purabritta's* postscript, that the John Sarkar and Srinath Sarkar manuscripts survive in the Archives under the reference “Box India, Barisal, 184/1847” (K. Sarkar, 1998).

4. Conclusion

The Baptist Christian community of Barishal emerged neither as a straightforward missionary achievement nor as a simple story of colonial coercion. Its formation depended on three things. A British Baptist mission station was established in 1828-29. An existing Bengali devotional movement had a leader who chose, in 1846, to embrace Christianity and evangelise among his own following. And an agrarian order, whose zamindars and taluqdars responded to the resulting loss of authority, mounted a sustained, at times violent, campaign of resistance, one the colonial legal system only partially and inconsistently checked. By the turn of the twentieth century the community had matured into a substantial, largely indigenously led rural institution of over two thousand church members and several times that number of adherents. This trajectory, on the admittedly less secure evidence available for the twentieth century, appears to have continued under William Carey III's long tenure. The Barishal case thus offers a documented, if incomplete, example of how Protestant Christianity took root in colonial Bengal: through indigenous religious agency operating within, and against, the coercive structures of an agrarian society.

Three limitations should be stated explicitly. First, the account's earliest and richest period still depends heavily on a single secondary monograph, Ali (1965), for its overall interpretive framing, even though its two central primary sources, the manuscript histories of John Sarkar and Srinath Sarkar, and Modak's Directory, have now been read directly. Second, the evidentiary base for the community's twentieth-century social history still rests substantially on a single secondary synthesis, Das (2016). Baroi's (1984) institutional history strengthens the record considerably for Sangha governance and finance between 1922 and 1970, but the years around 1940 to 1957 remain comparatively thin. Wells's unexamined BMS report may close this narrower remaining gap. Third, this article's engagement with *Purabritta* itself remains partial. Chapters 1, 2, and 7 to 9 have been read in full, together with pp. 273 to 297 and spot checks up to p. 350. Chapters 3 to 6 and 10 to 15 have not been read, and may revise or extend the account given here.

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