

Extract from - "The Mission of West Bengal" by H. Josson, S. J.
Catholic Press Ranchi, 1993 pg. 215 - 217 :

Mr. Bonig, Divisional Forest Officer of N. Andamans visited Ranchi to enlist coolies for the exploitation of the virgin forest of the Andamans¹. The convicts who hardly had their heart in their work, were a great expense for the Forest Department. The Oraons and the Mundas had been at work on the battlefields of France and the Punjab and Assam received regularly contingents from Chotanagpur. Why not the Andamans also? The proposition was eagerly accepted by the Fathers and before the end of 1918, the 400 labourers asked for, Oraons and Mundas, were recruited, transported to the Andamans and put to work immediately.

In the first days of May 1919 Fr. Van Eesbeck, Parish Priest of Ranchi, took sail for the Andamans to stay there for a month, so as to get to know the situation and prepare the reception of other labourers who would replace the first batch when their contract of 6 months expired. He found his people at work on Curlew Island, a small island in the Northern Archipelago, where they were reclaiming virgin forests, putting up huts and building roads.

Their behaviour both as labourers and as Christians had been excellent. "Although they are left to themselves, wrote Fr. Van Eesbeck², they gather regularly mornings and evenings to recite in common their prayers. I can verify this information by my own observations. With the exception of daily Mass, to which none of them was obliged to assist but which almost every one attended spontaneously, I abstained on principle from directing their pious exercises. Their religious songs were also much admired, and I asked myself how they came to sing so correctly and in tune without harmonium, which they did not have, of course. As you know, there are every year new catechumens among our Catholics. For them the sojourn in the Andamans has been beneficial. The group leaders took charge to prepare people for baptism as well as for other sacraments, which make good Christians : Confession and communion. When I arrived I found my work nicely cut out and every day I had examinations of catechism. There were a few failures, but before I left the Andamans, all the catechumens had reached the required level of instruction."

The result of this first visit was, therefore, a happy one. When they returned to Ranchi most of the men were ready to engage themselves for another 6 months. Fr. Van Eesbeck was also very pleased. "This visit could become a permanent feature. From every point of view this seems to be a better arrangement than the emigration to Assam." In September 1919 he accompanied 32 men from Ranchi to Calcutta, the port of embarkation. A third contingent followed.

- 1- According to the census of 1911, the population was 26,459 inhabitants of which 1317 were aboriginals of the most degraded savages and 11,897 Indian convicts. The 138 Catholics recorded in 1911 are visited from Rangoon, the Andamans being part of the Apostolic Vicariate of South Burma
- 2- Catholic Herald, 1919, p. 580