

54

ANNEXURE - ~~42~~ "A₂"

R. B. 7

(At St. Albert's Fr. Cornelius Baa is preparing for an apostolate, which the Province took up 74 years ago. Our Department of local Church History checked on its roots)

The Andaman Isles used to be called "Kala Pani"; according to the census of 1911, out of 26,439 inhabitants, 11,987 were convicts. They were guarded by a force of 2,000 army and police personnel. According to the same census there were 139 Catholics. They used to be visited by a priest from Rangoon the Andamans belonged to the Apostolic Vicariate of Burma.

When world war I (1914 - 1918) was about half-way, some newly liberated areas of France were so badly devastated as to be no longer inhabitable. Adivasis were known to be expert at clearing rough country. Early 1917 an officer presented himself at Manresa House and asked the Rector, the later Bishop Van Hoeck to provide the army with a labour corps. Fr. Molhant, who succeeded Hoffmann as Director of CCS showed interest. The conditions appeared favourable. The salary for one year's contract would amount to Rs. 300/- The corps would work under military command but the atmosphere would be congenial. The Chaplains would duplicate as Commanding Officers and have the rank of Captain. As Fr. Molhant reflected, the retail price of common rice was then Rs. 4.75 per mound and the CCS would be able to channel the money to the familiars.

On 13th June, 1917 Fr. Ory of St. John's leaves for France with 2,000 men of whom 1,200 Catholics. Fr. Floor, Parish Priest of Santoli (and later for many years the predecessor of Fr. Cornelius at Rengarish) follows on 26th June with 1,000 Catholics, 600 more in October and again 200 in November.

Meanwhile, revolution is brewing in Russia. And India needs better access to its borders. The labour corps is called in to build roads. On 25th March 1918, 300 Adivasis leave for the Punjab, initially without chaplain. On 9th June Capt. Ory, back from France, marches into Ranchi at the head of the first batallion. He takes a month's rest and then sets out for the Punjab with 200 men. Another group follows in September.

In 1918 the war is drawing to a close and the army stops recruiting. Fr. Molhant is upset: the monsoon has been bad. He is racking his brains to find suitable employment for those who may need it, when there turns up Mr. M. Bonig, Divisional Forest Officer, North Andamans. He has heard all about the famous labour corps. He himself, so far, was depending on penal labour, very expensive, most uncooperative and hopelessly unproductive. If only he could get adivasis, tough and steady workers, who take their job to heart. He proposed contracts for six months.