

# The Greek Orthodox Mission in India

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## Abstract:

The reference “Greek Orthodox Mission in India” does not carry any national or nationalistic implication, but the historical fact that since the 18<sup>th</sup> century Orthodoxy in West Bengal has been closely associated with the migrant Greek community of Kolkata. Until 1974 the presence of the Greek Orthodox Church in India had no missionary character. True missionary work started by Fr. Athanasios Anthidis in the 1980s, continued by the Fr. Ignatios Sennis in the 1990s until 2004, followed by Fr. Sotirios Trampas, and by Sister Nektaria Paradisi from 2006 till the present time.

Nowadays the Orthodox community of West Bengal, owing to the missionary work of the aforementioned persons and a considerable number of volunteers from Greece and U.S.A., comprises more than 5,500 believers. There are 13 churches and 13 native Indian priests under the supervision of his Eminence Metropolitan of Singapore and South Asia Konstantinos (Tsillis). Missionary and charitable work continues with the support of The Orthodox Philanthropic Society of the Orthodox Church (PSOC), and involves the establishment of primary and secondary schools, orphanages for boys and girls, as well as food and material supplies for those in need.

Christianity, apart from its various denominational interpretations, has a purely missionary dimension in faithfully applying the commandment of Jesus Christ, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt 28: 19–20; cf. Mark 16: 15, Luke 24: 47)<sup>1</sup> Given this, the

<sup>1</sup> See, Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*. New York: McGraw-

Greek Orthodox Church has not neglected the work of spreading the Gospel despite any limitations and difficulties it has had to face during its long historical course. However, using the term “the Greek Orthodox Church” does not by any means imply the identification of this Church with a specific nation; the Greek nation, in this case. The term “Greek Orthodox Church” does not mean a “national” Church, but an aggregation of Churches within the context of Eastern Orthodox Christianity where the ecumenical dimensions of Greek culture, the Greek language and the ancient Greek philosophical terminology played the main role in the formulation of dogma and the spread of Christianity, without overlooking the fact that a large percentage of the members of this ecclesiastical tradition were of Greek origin. Moreover, in the Indian context the term “Greek Orthodox Church” has been in use for many decades now, distinguishing it from other Orthodox Churches.<sup>2</sup>

So the Greek Orthodox mission has functioned, and continues to function under the auspices of three of the senior Patriarchates, namely the Patriarchate of Alexandria, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, and the Patriarchate of Jerusalem as well as the Autocephalous Churches of Greece and Cyprus. In this respect, the Greek Orthodox missionary activity in India is closely associated with the formation and history of the Greek immigrant community of Kolkata (former Calcutta) and the missionary supervision and assistance of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople with supplementary assistance from the Foreign Mission Office of the *Apostoliki Diakonia* of the Church of Greece.

## The Historical Background

Two tombstones preserved in the aisles of the Catholic Cathedral of the Virgin

Hill, 1962, reissued by Franklin Classics Trade Press, New York 2018. Γεώργιος Π. Πατρώνος, *Βιβλικές Προϋποθέσεις της Ιεραποστολής* (Αθήνα: Αποστολική Διακονία, 1983), 9–11, 51–54. Ηλίας Α. Βουλγαράκης, *Ιεραποστολή: Δρόμοι και Δομές* (Αθήνα: Αρμός, 1989), 42–45, 65–70, 259–266. Αρχιεπισκόπου Τιράνων και πάσης Αλβανίας Αναστασίου, *Ιεραποστολή στα Ίχνη του Χριστού*, (Αθήνα: Αποστολική Διακονία, 2007), 32–95.

<sup>2</sup> Specifically, in the Indian context, a number of Churches are known as “Orthodox,” such as the Russian Orthodox Church, the Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, also known as the Indian Orthodox Church, and the Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church. Besides, a street in Kolkata named “Greek Orthodox Church Row,” near the Greek Orthodox church dedicated to the Transfiguration of the Savior, and bilingual plates (in Bengali and English) on the streets of Kolkata showing the way to the “Greek Orthodox Church” are indicative of the Indian context. Moreover, in Kolkata there are temples with a national indication on their names, such as “Armenian Church,” “Chinese Church.” Thus, it seems that because of the variety of denominations and ethnic communities in India, the term “Greek Orthodox Church” functions as an unavoidable designation.

Mary of the Holy Rosary in the Murgihatta district of Kolkata, dated 1713 and 1728 respectively, testify to the presence of Greek immigrants already from the early 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup> A significant number of Greek families, mainly from the Thracian cities of Adrianople (Adrianoupolis, present-day Edirne in Turkey) and Filippoupolis (present-day Plovdiv in Bulgaria), emigrated to Bengal after the loss of their properties during the Russian-Turkish War of 1767–1774.<sup>4</sup> Another migratory wave arrived at the ports of East India from the Ionian Islands and the oppressed areas of Cappadocia and the Aegean Islands on ships carrying British settlers.<sup>5</sup> Cross referencing of various sources leads to the conclusion that in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century approximately 120 Greek families, most of them involved in trade, were living in Bengal, mainly in Kolkata, among the total 800,000 inhabitants of the city.<sup>6</sup>

Wishing to practice Orthodox worship, the Greek inhabitants started contacting the Archdiocese of Sinai, as it was the closest one to India, urging Archbishop Cyril I to send priests to India for the Orthodox believers of Bengal. In 1769, even though there was still no Orthodox temple in Kolkata, the Archbishop sent Father Nicephorus who, however, failed to meet the expectations of the Greek community<sup>7</sup> and was eventually replaced by the younger and more capable Archimandrite Ananias.

The first notable imprint of the religious activity of the Greek community is associated with the activity of the first prominent representative and founder of the Greek trade community, Panagiotis Hadzi Alexiou (also referred to as Panagiotis Alexandros Argyres and Alexios Argyree)<sup>8</sup> from Filippoupolis.<sup>9</sup> According to the available sources, in 1770 Panagiotis Hadzi Alexiou, fluent in both Arabic and English, was travelling on the ship “Alexander” as an interpreter for the trader and captain of the ship, Cudbert Thornhill, on a trading mission to Egypt.<sup>10</sup> While sailing

<sup>3</sup> Demetrios Th. Vassiliades, *The Greeks in India: A Survey in Philosophical Understanding* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd, 2000), 163. Paul B. Norris, *Ulysses in the Raj: Greeks in India 1700s–1800s* (London: British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia [BASCA], 1992), 19.

<sup>4</sup> Vassiliades, *The Greeks in India*, 163. Σαράντος Ι. Καργάκος, *Δημήτριος Γαλανός ο Αθηναίος (1760–1833): Ο Πρώτος Ευρωπαϊός Ινδολόγος* (Αθήνα: Gutenberg, 1994), 20–22. Dione Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks in India*, (Athens-Ioannina: “Dodoni” Publications, 2002), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Vassiliades, *The Greeks in India*, 163.

<sup>6</sup> Vassiliades, *The Greeks in India*, 162; Norris, *Ulysses in the Raj*, 19; Καργάκος, *Δημήτριος Γαλανός*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks*, 41.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>9</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks*, 41. Vassiliades, *The Greeks in India*, 162. Καργάκος, *Δημήτριος Γαλανός*, 19–20.

<sup>10</sup> Vassiliades, *The Greeks in india*, 162. Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks*, 41.



Figure 1. *The Last Supper*. Painting by Johannes Zoffany.

south, in the Bay of Bengal, the ship was caught in a violent storm, was dismantled and about to sink. It was during these dramatic moments that Hadzi Alexiou vowed to build a temple in Kolkata, if his life was spared. His prayers were apparently answered and the ship returned safely to the city port. Immediately Hadzi Alexiou bought a small house at 7 Amratollah Street, where the Orthodox believers could perform the Divine Liturgy until a proper place for worship could be built. In 1774, the Greek community submitted a petition, signed by all the Greek merchants, to the new Governor General of Bengal, Warren Hastings (1732–1818), requesting permission to construct a church. The governor granted the permission immediately, offering 2,000 rupees himself for the purpose. Once they received the governor's permission, the most prominent Greek merchants again sent a letter to the Archbishop of Sinai, Cyril, requesting a second priest, as well as icons by an "experienced artist," preferably of the "Cretan School."<sup>11</sup> Next year the Corfu-born hieromonk Father Constantinos Parthenios was sent to Kolkata. He "was an intelligent, charming and particularly good-looking man, soon became well-known and popular not only among the Greeks but among the English community as well."<sup>12</sup> This was probably why the German painter Johan Joseph Zoffany (1733–1810)

<sup>11</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks*, 41.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 41.

chose him as a model for Jesus Christ in his painting of the Last Supper (see figure 1), which is still hanging on a wall in the Anglican Church of St. John in Kolkata. Moreover, Father Constantinos demonstrated a fervent zeal in promoting the plans of Hadzi Alexiou (who was then residing in Dhaka) for the construction of a church by collecting numerous donations from Greek and other European settlers. Hadzi Alexiou did not live to see his project materialized as he died in 1777 in Dhaka. His family, however, offered a significant amount of money after his death for the construction of the church. The same year, Father Ananias returned to Sinai and Archimandrite Nathaniel from Sifnos and Hieromonk Damianos were sent to replace him, bringing with them

five large and seventeen smaller icons of the “Cretan School”, as well as liturgical books for Orthodox worship. In June 1780 the foundation stone was laid for the construction of the church at 7 Amratollah Street and two years later, in August, the consecration of the church took place, with the two priests, Nathaniel of Sifnos and Constantinos Parthenios, officiating. The church was dedicated to the Transfiguration of the Savior (Η Μεταμόρφωσις του Σωτήρος). The cost of the building was estimated at 30,000 rupees. The names of the founders and sponsors were engraved on a marble slab (see figure 2). Among these are mentioned H.E. Warren Hastings, Archimandrite Parthenios of Corfu, Alexandros Argyres, Georgios Michael Mavroidis-Bairaktaroglous, Christodoulos Mavroidis, Georgios and Aggeliki Leontiou, the Family of Athanasios Metsos, Michael Andreadis and various Greek and British merchants of Bengal in the year 1778.<sup>13</sup>

The same year (1782) Nathaniel of Sifnos wrote to the Archbishop of Sinai requesting his permission to perform mixed marriages between members of the Orthodox Christian community and members of other Christian denominations, due to the relatively small number of members of the Greek community. Permission was granted with the Ecumenical Patriarch Gabriel’s consent.<sup>14</sup>

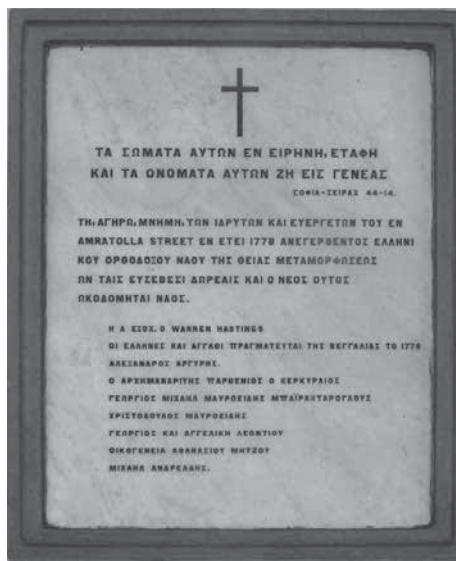


Figure 2. Marble slab with the names of founders and sponsors of the Orthodox church in Kolkata.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

Shortly after the consecration of the new church, a sad dispute erupted between the Greek merchants and the Archdiocese of Sinai, probably due to the monastery's pecuniary demands on the Greek community.<sup>15</sup> The Archbishop of Sinai sent another hieromonk, Dionysius of Moudania,<sup>16</sup> as a replacement for Father Nathaniel. His arrival did not bring peace either, as between 1793 and 1812 the Orthodox community of Kolkata had no officiating clergy. Eventually, following the request made by Greek merchants to both the Archbishop of Sinai and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople Ieremias IV, two priests were sent in 1812: Archimandrite Benjamin of Sinai and Gregory of Sifnos from Constantinople. Father Benjamin, who favorably impressed the Greek merchants, remained in Kolkata, while Father Gregory was sent to Dhaka to serve in the church that was newly constructed there thanks to the efforts of Panagiotakis Alexiou, the son of the deceased Hadzi Alexiou, known among the British of Bengal as Alexander Panioty.<sup>17</sup>

Around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was a significant revival of the Greek community of Kolkata, when a number of Greek trading firms based in London expanded their commercial activities by establishing branches in Kolkata.<sup>18</sup> The mass arrival of Greeks in India breathed new life into the Orthodox Church in Kolkata. With donations by all the Greek firms, especially the Ralli Brothers, the church was restored and embellished. The Orthodox community, no longer under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Sinai, asked the Greek government in 1852 to send priests directly from Greece. The Reverend Kallistratos Adamou who served at the Greek immigrant community church of Kolkata from 1969 to 1971, wrote a short book titled *The History of the Greek Church in Calcutta India* giving the names of the priests who served in Kolkata as follows:<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Demetrios Galanos (1760–1833), one of the pioneers of indological research and an eminent scholar who served as a teacher in Kolkata between 1786 and 1793, blamed Father Dionysios for being “the cause of dishonor to our nation” because he was highly critical of his predecessor Nathaniel of Sifnos. The latter was characterized by Galanos as “a splendid example of learning and virtue”. See Vassiliades, *The Greeks in India*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> The church's consecration ceremony was held on 3<sup>rd</sup> of November 1812 and Gregory officiated at the first Divine Liturgy. He was replaced in 1817 by Father Ambrosios of Sinai, who was replaced in turn in 1832 by Archimandrite Ananias of Serres. These priests also taught the Greek language to the children of Greek merchants. In 1841 Joseph of Zakynthos arrived in Dhaka. He was the last cleric to serve the Greek community of the city. Around the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century companies in Dhaka began to decline. The members of the Greek community were scattered with the majority of them settling in Kolkata. The church was abandoned and as time passed it collapsed on the tomb of its founder, Alexander Panioty, who had been buried inside.

<sup>18</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> Rev. Kallistratos Adamou, *The History of the Greek Church in Calcutta India* (Cal-





Left: Figure 3. Inside the Greek cemetery. Right: Figure 4. Inside view of the Greek cemetery.

Rev. Grigorios Ioannides 1852-1870  
 Rev. Damaskinos Papaspyropoulos 1871-1878  
 Archimandrite Constantine Vafidis 1878-1880  
 Archmandrite Kallinicos Kanellas 1880-1886  
 Rev. Nicholas Panas 1886-1891  
 Archimandrite Efthimios Platis 1891-1897  
 Archimandrite Germanos Kazakos 1897-1913  
 Archmandrite Athanasios Alexiou 1913-1960  
 Rev. Kallistratos Adamou 1969-1970

In 1923, as Amratollah Street had turned into a busy shopping center and the noise of the traffic hindered the celebration of the Divine Liturgy and other worship services, the Greek community decided to build a new church in another area. The church and its various lodges, as well as the land that housed them, were sold and a plot bought in the area of Kalighat, near the famous temple of the Hindu goddess Kali. Another plot of land was bought in the northern outskirts of the city, specifically near the Phoolbagan location, to be used as a cemetery (present address: 105, Moulana Abul Kalam Azad Sarani; see figures 3 & 4).<sup>20</sup> On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of November

cutta: Printed at Mudranikam 13-A, Bepin Pal Road, 1970), 4.

<sup>20</sup> Priyanka Dasgupta, "India's Only Greek Cemetery lies in Utter Neglect in Kolkata," March 27, 2018. Accessed September 02, 2019. <https://timesofindia.india-times.com/city/kolkata/indias-only-greek-cemetery-lies-in-utter-neglect-in-Kolkata/articleshow/63456208.cms>. Somen Sengupta, "Kolkata's Greek Heritage: Alexander's Fading Footprint", April 09, 2017. Accessed October 10, 2019. <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2017/sunday-edition/kolkatas-greek-heritage-alexanders-fading-footprint.html>. Also see "Greek Cemetery in Kolkata, India 2017," video by Orthodox Metropolitanate of Singapore and South Asia, posted on February 11, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LZKjkbZLTG0>. Accessed October 26, 2019.



Left: Figure 5. The interior of the Orthodox church.

Right: Figure 6. The Transfiguration of the Savior's church.

1924 the foundation stone was laid at Russa Road, Kalighat, and soon a church resembling an ancient Greek temple of Doric style was constructed (see figures 5 & 6). The new church was again dedicated to the Transfiguration of the Savior. The members of the Orthodox Church visited the church regularly and every Sunday during the Divine Liturgy at 10 a.m., the choir of the Anglican church of St. Thomas came there to sing ecclesiastical hymns in the Greek language.<sup>21</sup>

Apart from the short-lived Orthodox church in Dhaka, the Orthodox church of Kolkata, which operates until today, is the only one erected in the Indian sub-continent. Although there were Greek communities in Mumbai, Madras (today's Chennai) and Karachi, no Orthodox church was ever built there. The Greek inhabitants of these cities usually baptized their children in Protestant churches, mainly Anglican, and baptized them again in an Orthodox church in Greece during their first home leave. They would occasionally invite a priest from Kolkata to officiate at baptisms and weddings. In such cases the priests had to make a long and arduous journey by train, ship, or both and the costs—usually high—of travel and maintenance were paid by those who invited them.

After World War II and India's independence from the British Crown, the Greek population in India began to decline considerably. In fact, when the largest Greek trading firm, that of the Ralli Brothers, was sold in 1961 to the British company General Universal Stores in London, many of the Greek employees preferred to take early retirement and depart either for Greece or Britain. After blessing and bidding the last Greek immigrants farewell, Archimandrite Athanasios Alexiou closed the church of the Transfiguration of the Savior. Nine years later Rev. Kalistratos Adamou came from Australia to reopen the church. He arrived in October

<sup>21</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks*, 47.



1969 and stayed in Kolkata for about two years. During the 1970s, according to Antony Mango, Consul General of Greece at the time, at least twelve Greeks lived in Mumbai, three in Madras and two in Kanpur.<sup>22</sup> According to the Rev. Kallistratos Adamou only four Greeks were living in Kolkata, two in Delhi, eight in Nepal and ten in Pakistan.<sup>23</sup> The Orthodox church was mainly preserved because of the presence of Greek sailors. The few Greeks living there were in mixed marriages. Even though they did not speak Greek any more, they retained their faith. Other European Orthodox believers—Bulgarians, Czechs, Romanians and Poles—joined them occasionally for worship during the most important Christian feasts.

The last priest to serve at the church of Kolkata, from 1972 to 1974, was the Rev. Constantinos Chalvatzakis-Velladios (1929–2018). In collaboration with the Greek Embassy of New Delhi, he collected the archives of the Greek community of Kolkata (including those of the Greeks who lived in Chennai, Mumbai and Darjeeling), comprising about 50,000 pages that included administrative records of the Greek community, commercial records, correspondence with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople, the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mount Sinai, the Greek Government, and the Government of Bengal, as well as miscellaneous relics and even weapons of that time.<sup>24</sup> The archives were loaded on ships to be delivered to the Archdiocese of Athens in the hope that future scholars would utilize their content. Unfortunately, they disappeared inexplicably during the transfer and, along with them, valuable historical data regarding the life and activities of the Greek community of Kolkata were lost.<sup>25</sup> The presence of the Greek Orthodox Church in India from its beginning in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the 1970s had no missionary character. It merely served the spiritual needs of the Orthodox Greeks in India. When the Rev. Konstantinos Chalvatzakis-Velladios departed in 1974, the church of the Transfiguration of the Savior was left without a priest. For almost ten years, the Divine Liturgy of the Orthodox Church was not celebrated in India. But that began to change with the arrival of the Rev. Athanasios Anthidis. With his arrival, the missionary work of the Greek Orthodox Church in India began in earnest.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>23</sup> When I visited Kolkata during the winter of 1992, the Rev. Ignatios Sennis (as he then was), vicar of the church of the Transfiguration of the Savior, informed me that from the old Greek community of Kolkata there was only one elderly descendant, George Papadopoulos, owner of the ATTICON Bakery, in the central sector of Kolkata, who spoke very little Greek.

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication by telephone between 2006–2010.

<sup>25</sup> See, π. Κωνσταντίνος Χαλβατζάκης-Βελλάδιος, «Τα Ιστορικά Αρχεία των Ελλήνων των Ινδιών», *Νέα Εστία* 1115 (1975) (Athens), 1077–1084.

## The Missionary Activity of the Rev. Athanasios Anthidis

Father Athanasios Anthidis (1916–1990) was a Greek from Egypt, who had performed significant missionary work in Kenya, Uganda, Zaire and Ethiopia.<sup>26</sup> After being repeatedly invited by Michael Roy,<sup>27</sup> an English language teacher who later became the first Indian Orthodox priest,<sup>28</sup> he decided to go to India. Having translated basic ecclesiastical and liturgical books from Greek to English, he arrived in Mumbai at Christmas 1980. After spending a relatively short time in Cochin and Kerala,<sup>29</sup> he ended up in Arambagh of West Bengal, 90 km north of Kolkata. There Father Athanasios began his missionary work despite the very difficult conditions he faced.<sup>30</sup> The Orthodox mission was settled in a rented house, where he set up a small church dedicated to Saint Thomas, the first missionary in India. After the consecration of the church on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1981, Father Athanasios started to preach, initially, Sunday sermons and later started a seminary for catechists, deacons, and priests. At the same time, he began touring the villages of the surrounding area. Travelling was very hard; he had to change buses many times, use bullock carts, and even walk, despite a serious problem with his legs. His work was even more difficult during the monsoon season. In June 1983 the first baptisms were performed. However, a problem arose as the owner of the rented house requested it for his own use. So Father Athanasios found himself compelled to buy a new plot which he divided into two parts. One part was used as an Orthodox cemetery and on the other a small church dedicated to St. Thomas was built, along with the Missionary Center in which Father Athanasios resided. The church also housed dormitories as well as a small printing office.

Despite his advanced age (he was already 66 years old), he toured the villages of the region and he soon formed twenty-four communities of believers.<sup>31</sup> Thanks to the missionary work of Father Athanasios about 1,900 people embraced the Or-

<sup>26</sup> See, Αρχιμ. Σωτήριος Τράμπας, «Η “Δική μου” Ινδία», *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 39 (1991) (Athens), 72 [72–73].

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> He was ordained in 1986.

<sup>29</sup> See a published letter from Fr. Athanasios Anthidis to Konstantinos Stratigopoulos, who was in charge of the Foreign Mission Office of the Church of Greece, dated 30<sup>th</sup> January 1981, edited with the title «Από τη σύγχρονη ιστορία της Ιεραποστολής» in the journal *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 41 (1992), 12.

<sup>30</sup> See, Αρχιμ. Σωτήριος Τράμπας, «Η “Δική” μου Ινδία», 73. Μοναχή Νεκταρία, «Ιεραποστολή στην Ινδία», *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 41 (1992), 14 [13-15].

<sup>31</sup> See the article by Sister Nektaria, «Μποραμάρ», *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 42 (1992), 40–41, concerning to catechism of the young biochemist Ioannis of Boramara village and his efforts towards the catechizing of his fellow villagers and the construction of a church in his village.

thodox faith.<sup>32</sup> Father Athanasios was assisted in his work by two Indian priests: Fr. Michael Roy, who helped him to translate the Divine Liturgy, Chrysostom's Hieratikon (Ἱερατικόν) and a volume of the Orthodox Catechesis (Catechism) into the local dialect; and Fr. Patapios Bhowmick, who constructed a hut-temple dedicated to Saint Bartholomew in his village, Takouranichowk, and preached the Orthodox faith to his fellow villagers.<sup>33</sup>

Fr. Athanasios strove for ten years in India without having the help he deserved from Greece.<sup>34</sup> At times, however, Greek clerics voluntarily offered their missionary support and assistance, among them Fr. Kyrillos Christakis (later Metropolitan of Thessalotida), who stayed close to him for long periods and Archimandrite Sotirios Trampas (the present day Metropolitan of Pisidia).

Fr. Athanasios had little in his possession, but he did not stop his missionary work even for a moment. It is noteworthy that when a sum of money was sent to him for an operation on his legs, he preferred to use it for the needs of his missionary center.<sup>35</sup>

Fr. Athanasios died unexpectedly on November 28, 1990 and was buried there, in Arambagh, in the soil of West Bengal, as it was his last wish. Before his passing, he was glad to see, as a result of his missionary efforts, two Indian priests and a deacon ordained by the Metropolitan of New Zealand Dionysios (Psiasas). Close to his burial place is also the tomb

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Two tombstones preserved  
in the aisles of the Catholic  
Cathedral of the Virgin Mary  
of the Holy Rosary in the  
Murgihatta district of Kolkata,  
dated 1713 and 1728 respectively,  
testify to the presence of Greek  
immigrants already from the  
early 18<sup>th</sup> century. A significant  
number of Greek families,  
mainly from the Thracian cities  
of Adrianople (Adrianoupolis,  
present-day Edirne in Turkey) and  
Filippoupolis (present-day Plovdiv  
in Bulgaria), emigrated to Bengal  
after the loss of their properties  
during the Russian-Turkish War of  
1767–1774

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<sup>32</sup> See, Mov. Νεκταρία, «Ἱεραποστολή στην Ἰνδία», *Πάντα τα Ἐθνη* 41 (1992), 14.

<sup>33</sup> A. X., «Ο Ἱεραπόστολος της Ἰνδίας Αρχιμανδρίτης π. Αθανάσιος Ανθίδης (1917-1990)», *ΟΔΟΙΠΟΡΙΚΟ* 32 (2010), posted on <https://filoierapastolisumatras.wordpress.com/2010/10/12>. Accessed October 26, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> See, Mov. Νεκταρία, «Ἱεραποστολή στην Ἰνδία», 14. Dimitrios Vassiliadis, “*Three Centuries of Hellenic Presence in Bengal*”, 31 December 2005. Accessed October 22, 2019 <https://elinepa.org/en/three-centures-of-hellenic-presence-in-bengal>.

<sup>35</sup> A.X., «Ο Ἱεραπόστολος της Ἰνδίας Αρχιμανδρίτης π. Αθανάσιος Ανθίδης (1917-1990)», *ΟΔΟΙΠΟΡΙΚΟ* 32. <https://filoierapostolisumatras.wordpress.com/2010/10/12>.

of Mrs Stamatia Papastamatiou from Athens, who had gone to India in order to help him in his missionary work and died a month after him. The folk of Arambagh were not left without spiritual guidance for long; on May 1991, Fr. Sotirios Trampas arrived in Arambagh from Korea in order to continue what Fr. Athanasios had accomplished in his missionary work.<sup>36</sup>

### The Missionary Activity of Fr. Ignatios Sennis

After the death of Fr. Athanasios, with the blessing of His Eminence Dionysios, Metropolitan of New Zealand and Exarch of India and Far East, Fr. Ignatios Sennis, a



Figure 7. The entrance of the Greek Cemetery.

hieromonk from Stavronikita Monastery on Mount Athos, arrived in August 1991 in West Bengal to continue the missionary work of his predecessor. His work was supported by the nun Nektaria Paradisi and from time to time by Archimandrite Sotirios Trampas. Fr. Ignatius had also ministered in a mission in South Korea for five years, assisting Fr. Sotirios Trampas. Greek civilians arrived occasionally in Kolkata to voluntarily aid the missionary work. In the intervening years, Roussa Street, where the church

was located, had been renamed Mouherjee Str. (the current address of the church is Greek Orthodox Church, 2A Library Road, Kalighat, Kolkata 700026, India). In the beginning, the two missionaries settled in the rectory next to the church. As it had been in disuse for 17 years, the church was in a very bad condition, quite dilapidated, full of rats, snakes and cockroaches. It took time, hard work and a fairly large amount of money for it to be restored. Furthermore, restorations were required in the rectory as well, as it was also in a terrible condition. With financial assistance from the Foreign Mission Office of the *Apostoliki Diakonia* of the Church of Greece, as well as the Orthodox Brotherhood of Foreign Mission of Thessaloniki via the Far East Patriarchal Institute of Foreign Mission,<sup>37</sup> the restoration work was

<sup>36</sup> Μον. Νεκταρία, «Ιεραποστολή στην Ινδία», 14.

<sup>37</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks*, 53. Μον. Νεκταρία, «Ιεραποστολή στην Ινδία», 14.

concluded in six months. Saplings, shrubs and flowering plants were planted in the area surrounding the church. In late January to early February 1992, the Metropolitan of New Zealand Dionysios, on his pastoral tour of the newly born churches of the Far East, visited the Orthodox Church of India accompanied by Fr. Sotirios Trampas. He officiated the Divine Liturgy in the renovated church and ordained as deacons two Indian believers who were teachers by profession. He met the parish councils of the Orthodox communities and gave his advice and guidance.<sup>38</sup> As the reopening of the church in Kolkata became known quickly, daily visits began by organized groups of monks of other denominations, students of theological seminaries and young Hindus with spiritual pursuits and interests. Besides them, poor and sick people started coming, asking for help. This new situation led to the idea of restoring an almost destroyed building, formerly used as a residence for the servants, so as to turn it into a first-aid clinic.<sup>39</sup> The missionary and charitable activities were expanded to the surrounding villages as far as Arambagh. In most of these villages, believers had never attended the Divine Liturgy, nor had they partaken of Holy Communion, even though they had been baptized 3–4 years before. Thus, the celebration of the Divine Liturgy in the villages was established, taking place either in the local temple-hut or in the courtyard of a hut where a simple table was used as an altar.<sup>40</sup> Father Ignatios started a special charitable initiative to provide basic medical care and food for the needy, both in Kolkata and the surrounding villages where Orthodox Christians, who had been baptized by Fr. Athanasios Anthisdis, were living.

In 1993, the Philanthropic Society of the Orthodox Church (PSOC) was founded by Fr. Ignatios and Sister Nektaria. A health center with a salaried physician was created in a half-ruined lodge in the backyard of the church for the hospitalization of sick people from the surrounding area. The drugs were provided free of charge. Next to the infirmary, a small school for twenty students was established, where two female Bengali teachers started teaching. Classes for deaf children were held every Wednesday. Every Monday at noon, food rations were distributed to about 800 poor and disabled people in the area. Moreover, every morning at 8:30 a.m., 250 preschool children were served breakfast which consisted of a cup of milk and vitamin biscuits.<sup>41</sup> That daily breakfast was an offering by Fr. Ignatios himself with

<sup>38</sup> Μον. Νεκταρία, «Ιεραποστολή στην Ινδία», 13.

<sup>39</sup> See, μοναχή Νεκταρία Παραδείση, «Μερικές Σκέψεις για το Μέλλον της Ιεραποστολής», *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 42 (1992), 37 [36–38].

<sup>40</sup> See, μον. Νεκταρία Παραδείση, «Ιεραποστολή στην Ινδία», 15 and Νεκταρία μοναχή, «Θεία Λειτουργία στο Τακουρανισόκ Ινδίας», *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 40 (1991), 124–125.

<sup>41</sup> Concerning the daily schedule of the missionary and philanthropic activity at Kolkata in 1993, see Themistocles Zacharegas' report, an educator and volunteer of the orthodox mission in Kolkata, «Η Ιεραποστολική Ημέρα στην Καλκούτα», *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 49





Figure 8. The Chapel of the Prophet Elias.



the help of other priests, deacons and other sponsors from Greece. In 1994, after receiving permission from the Greek Embassy in New Delhi, the wall of the Greek cemetery was restored (see figure 7), as well as the chapel of Prophet Elias (Elijah) in it (see figure 8).<sup>42</sup> Thus, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of July of the same year, during the feast day of the prophet, the chapel was reopened after remaining closed for decades.<sup>43</sup> In time, local residents were ordained as priests and deacons. In Kolkata a three-period seminar was organized and was attended by Christians from various villages, including priests and catechists. The seminar was held by educators such as Themistocles Zacharegas (now Demetrios, Metropolitan of Irinopolis and Exarch of Tanzania and Seychelles Islands), the Greek-speaking Romanian Peter Florea and Mrs Anastasia Polyxenidou.<sup>44</sup> The missionary work was conducted mainly outside of Kolkata, within a radius of 200 kilometres, in 38 villages of West Bengal.<sup>45</sup> Besides, the Orthodox Christian Missionary Center (O.C.M.C.) sent every year from U.S.A. a team of 4–5 catechists guided by a priest for a three week seminar attended by 80–100 believers.<sup>46</sup> A report by Fr. Ignatios depicts the way the missionary work was done: “We usually start very early, at about 3 o’clock in the morning, and after 5–6 hours of difficult journey we arrive at our destination. The longing with which they are waiting for us dissipates our physical fatigue. From early morning, Christians come out on the street, waiting for us. We get off the beleaguered Jeep and, loaded up with the items we have brought, we walk through the paddies for 30–40 minutes, leaping over the small irrigation channels, slipping once in a while so that we risk a dip in the water-covered field. Our brethren on the road have already started questioning us impatiently, wanting to learn more about Christ and the way he is worshipped. We strive as much as possible to respond to everyone, reassuring them that we have time enough after the Divine Liturgy to discuss everything. We ponder the spiritual hunger of our brethren when suddenly we come back to reality and must move aside to pass a cow blocking our way.”<sup>47</sup>

Eight temples were built in the villages, while group baptisms and weddings were held in the spacious church of Kolkata.<sup>48</sup> Six clinics were also established in the

(1994), 18–19.

<sup>42</sup> See the letter of Fr. Ignatios Sennis «Προς το Γραφείο Εξωτερικής Ιεραποστολής της Αποστολικής Διακονίας, 13.10.1994» to the Foreign Mission Office of *Apostoliki Diakonia*, published in *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 52 (1994), 120–122, 122. Κώστας Μπαρούτας, *Οι Ναοί των Ελλήνων Μεταναστών* (Athens: Καρακώτσογλου, 2006), 157.

<sup>43</sup> Ιερομ. Ιγνάτιος Σεννής, «Προς το Γραφείο Εξωτερικής Ιεραποστολής», 122.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>45</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks*, 53.

<sup>46</sup> Μοναχός Ιγνάτιος, «Καλκούτα, Οκτώβριος 1999», *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 72 (1999), 18.

<sup>47</sup> Ιερομ. Ιγνάτιος, «Προς το Γραφείο Εξωτερικής Ιεραποστολής, 13.10.1994», 120.

<sup>48</sup> Ιερομόν. Ιγνάτιος, «Προς το Γραφείο Εξωτερικής Ιεραποστολής, 13.10.1994»,

rural area and a dental clinic as well with medication provided free of charge. Three primary schools were also established, with 120 pupils each, and textbooks were also provided free of charge.<sup>49</sup> An orphanage was even established in Bakeswar, 12

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The work of the Greek Orthodox mission in India continues, despite the serious difficulties caused by the economic crisis in Greece in the last 10 years. Thanks to the efforts of the Greek Orthodox mission, the sacred services and ceremonies in memory of saints and martyrs of the Church are normally celebrated in the Bengali language. The charity work of the Mission continues tirelessly to fight poverty and social injustice against the weak.

kilometres south of Kolkata, under the auspices of the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Hong Kong and the Far East, which was inaugurated on 19<sup>th</sup> of August, 1999, by their Eminences the Metropolitan of Hong Kong and the Far East Niketas and the Metropolitan of New Zealand and former Exarch of India Dionysios, in the presence of the Greek ambassador in New Delhi, administrative officials of Kolkata and a large number of civilians.<sup>50</sup> In the same area a reception lodge was built, as well as a hostel, a sanitarium and a church. Two doctors and a dentist would visit the orphanage three times in a week, not only to check the little girls, but also to provide medical care to all residents of Bakeswar.<sup>51</sup> The charitable work of the Greek Orthodox mission covered other needs of the residents through services such as the provision of assistance to disabled people, wheelchairs, repairs to houses that had been damaged by the monsoon, donations of cows to families with many children, sewing machines for women, drilling for drinking water in villages and distribution of food and clothing.<sup>52</sup>

Between 1998 and 2000, due to the exacerbation of a peculiar Hindu nationalism, persecutions erupted against the missions of all Christian denominations. Temples and houses of Christians were burned, Christian women raped, missionaries of non-Orthodox denominations murdered.<sup>53</sup> One of the major problems that

122. Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks*, 57.

<sup>49</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *A Chronicle of the Greeks*, 57.

<sup>50</sup> See, Ιγνάτιος μοναχός, «Καλκούτα, Οκτώβριος 1999», *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 72 (1999), 17 [17–18].

<sup>51</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *ibid.*, 53.

<sup>52</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *ibid.*, 53. «Ιεραποστολική Ημέρα στην Καλκούτα», *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 49 (1994), 18-19.

<sup>53</sup> Ιερομ. Δημήτριος Ζαχαρέγκας, «Μάρτιος–Οκτώβριος 1999—Οκτώ Μήνες Ορθόδοξου Παρουσίας στη Βομβάη των Ινδιών», *Πάντα τα Έθνη* 72 (1999), 16.

arose in the Orthodox missionary team of Kolkata as a result of this persecution was that the local government refused to grant a residence permit to the missionaries. This decision forced Fr. Ignatios to depart for Greece in June 2004. Acknowledging the missionary work of Fr. Ignatios, the Patriarchate of Alexandria appointed him Metropolitan of Madagascar, in place of the late Metropolitan Nektarios Kellis. On departing from India, Fr. Ignatios left behind a well-secured Orthodox community with more than 3,000 members.<sup>54</sup>

### The Missionary Work of Sister Nektaria Paradisi

Sister Nektaria Paradisi, who originates from Korinth and is a nun of the Monastery of Saint Patapios at Loutraki, returned to Kolkata in November 2006, after solving the problem of issuing a visa. With labor despite adversity and with a constant struggle to find financial resources, she managed to continue the missionary work of the Greek Orthodox mission.<sup>55</sup> Her efforts were assisted by Andreas Mondal, a retired senior officer of the Indian Army, who is currently an Orthodox priest.<sup>56</sup> In 2008 the Holy Metropolitanate of Singapore and South Asia was founded, belonging canonically and spiritually to the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople. It numbers about 50,000 believers and has 45 parishes, including the parishes of India. According to the official website of the Holy Metropolitanate of Singapore and South Asia,<sup>57</sup> the web site of the Philanthropic Society of the Orthodox Church (PSOC)<sup>58</sup> and the annual edition of “Diptycha” («Δίπτυχα») of the *Apostoliki Diakonia* of the Church of Greece,<sup>59</sup> the situation of parishes and missionary activity in India is the following:

In the West Bengal region there are currently 11 parishes (Akhina, Kaknan, Modina, Thakuranichowk, Narendrachowk, Arambagh, Ghashpur, Damodarpur, Ghoradah, Dirghagram, Bakeswar) with their respective churches, in which thirteen priests serve. In total there are 11 churches in the villages, 1 in Kolkata, and 1 additional chapel in Kolkata. There are still thirteen orthodox parishes (in Nada-

<sup>54</sup> Marcos-Dodis, *ibid*, 53.

<sup>55</sup> “Greek Orthodox Mission Sets an Example in India”, Aug 23, 2009. Accessed October 26, 2019. <https://world.greekreporter.com/2009/08/23/greek-orthodox-mission-sets-an-example-in-india>,

<sup>56</sup> See, «Χάρτης Ορθόδοξης Εξωτερικής Ιεραποστολής: Ινδία». Accessed November 05, 2019, <https://www.e-minima.gr/india>.

<sup>57</sup> See, <https://www.ec-patr.org/dioceses.php?lang-gr&id=97>.

<sup>58</sup> See, <https://thepsoc.org>.

<sup>59</sup> See, *Δίπτυχα της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, Κανονάριον-Επετηρίς*, (Athens: Έκδοσις Αποστολικής Διακονίας της Εκκλησίας της Ελλάδος, 2019), 1177–1179.

pur, Parul, Boramar, Boluri, Damodarpur, Kakdeep, Falta, Tanrui, Gamaria, Chouka, Sukhchandpur, Ghoshpur, Ghoradah) with catechists in charge. As far as missionary work is concerned, it includes pastoral visits, catechism and the celebration of services in all areas of West Bengal where parishes and Orthodox communities exist. Liturgical and spiritual books have been translated and printed in all local dialects. Seminars are held for the training of clerics, as well as Sunday meetings for believers and catechumens.

The charity work of the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Singapore and South Asia that is carried out in India under the supervision of Sister Nektaria Paradisi includes:

- The operation of the Theotokos Girls' Hostel in Bakeswar, with 120 residents and the possibility to house up to 200. The orphanage also houses a dental surgery, a clinic and an eye-clinic.
- Saint Ignatius Boys' Hostel in Bakeswar is an orphanage for boys, inaugurated in 2011 with more than 65 residents.
- A boarding school for blind children.
- Six dispensaries in the areas of Kalighat, Noihatī, Akhina, Ghoshpur, Takouranichowk and Dirghagram, in which free medical care is provided.
- Six elementary schools, each one with four appointed teachers, (at Mohanapur, Dirghagram, Kaknan, Takouranichowk, Ghoradah) and the new English-speaking "Saint Ignatius" School at Bakeswar with free attendance.

At Bakeswar, a new building of "St Ignatius High School" was inaugurated on 4<sup>th</sup> of May 2019 by the Metropolitan of Singapore and South Asia Konstantinos (Tsillis) in the presence of the Metropolitan of Madagascar Ignatios, the Metropolitan of Guinea Georgios, the Ambassador of Greece in India Mr. Panos Kalogeropoulos, Sister Nektaria, local officials and the school's teachers.<sup>60</sup> There is also a technical school for the training of deprived girls. Daily breakfast is distributed (milk enriched with vitamins and biscuits) to 300 needy children, as well as lunch to the elderly, the sick and homeless individuals. Moreover, there is a regular distribution of food, clothing, pharmaceuticals and school supplies to distressed people.

The work of the Greek Orthodox mission in India continues, despite the serious difficulties caused by the economic crisis in Greece in the last 10 years. Thanks to

<sup>60</sup> See, Ανδρέας Λουδάρος, «Εγκαινίσθηκε Εντυπωσιακό Πρότυπο Σχολείο στην Ινδία από τη Μητρόπολη Σιγκαπούρης», 04/05/2019. Accessed September 27, 2019 [https://orthodoxiainfo](https://orthodoxiainfo;),; "Inauguration of a New Building at the St Ignatius High School in West Bengal", May 15, 2019 by ELINEPA (Indo-Hellenic Society for Culture & Development). Accessed May 30, 2019, <https://elinepa.org>; «Εγκαίνια Νέου Εκπαιδευτηρίου στην Καλκούτα της Ινδίας», May 4, 2019. Accessed May 30, 2019, <https://orthodoxianewsagency.gr>.

the efforts of the Greek Orthodox mission, more than 5,000 members have been added to the Orthodox Christian community of India as well as hundreds of catechumens.<sup>61</sup> The sacred services and ceremonies in memory of saints and martyrs of the Church are normally celebrated in the Bengali language. The charity work of the Mission continues tirelessly to fight poverty and social injustice against the weak for as long as possible. As Sister Nektaria said in an interview (March 08, 2019):

Life in Kolkata is hard. [...] The biggest problem in Kolkata is poverty. Million[s] of people are sleeping on the street. Many children are begging instead of studying. Other children, at a very young age, are forced to [do] very hard work, that only an adult can do. And the most shocking thing is to see very young, homeless girls having children from unknown fathers. Or you see very young girls who are forcibly married to old men because their family wants to get rid of them. [...] Our orphanage and the school have saved since 1999 hundreds of lives. Many children—orphaned, abandoned, homeless—found a warm home in here. They found affection and love; what they need most. They got a very good education. They start hav[ing] dreams for their lives. Our work is a drop in the ocean of needs.<sup>62</sup>

A new building is planned to accommodate more children and provide care and basic education for destitute children. “Financial assistance is urgently needed now,” says Sister Nektaria and she concludes “God brought a weak woman here, to India, to take on this enormous project because from within our weakness, God is revealed.”<sup>63</sup>

The action taken so far by the Greek missionaries in India, following the example of the Savior Jesus Christ and His Apostles, is an example for the future missionaries despite the difficulties, adversities and hardships that they will probably face. The words of Saint Paul fit perfectly in this circumstance. Compared to other believers, a missionary is exposed to “[.] far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death [...] on frequent journeys,

<sup>61</sup> See, “Greek Orthodox Mission sets an Example in India”, Aug 23, 2009. Accessed August 6, 2019, <https://word.greekreporter.com/2009/08/23/greek-orthodox-mission-sets-an-example-in-india>.

<sup>62</sup> See the filmed interview posted on, “The Only Greek in Kolkata is Mother to thousands”, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=t2WLOt55mpY>, premiered Mar 8, 2019 by GreekReporter. Accessed November 10, 2019. For more information about Sister Nektaria’s work and the PSOC see, Tasos Kokkinidis, “Sister Nektaria: The Only Greek in Kolkata is Mother to Thousands”, Mar 7, 2019. Accessed August 30, 2019, <https://world.greekreporter.com/2019/03/07/sister-nektaria-the-only-greek-of-calcutta-and-mother-to-thousands>. See also the same report on <https://theorthodoxword.com/sister-nektaria-the-only-greek-in-kolkata-india-is-mother-to-thousands>, March 7, 2019. Accessed August 30, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> Tasos Kokkinidis, *ibid.*

in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure” (2 Cor. 11: 23-27; cf. 6: 4-10). All this, of course for the “comfort and salvation” (2 Cor. 1:6) of mankind, for the sake of which the missionary strives and proceeds to the confession of faith (Mt. 10:32) as the basic element of apostolicity in the world.\* ■

Keywords:

Orthodox Mission in India, Orthodox Community in India, Orthodox Christians in India, Orthodox Church in India, Indian Orthodox Christians, Greek community in Kolkata

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