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Original scientific paper
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Presenting India from a Muddy Village: The Importance of Documentary Writings of the Interwar Croatian and Slovenian Missionaries in Bengal[2]

The paper examines the diverse and extensive documentary writings of a small group of Yugoslav missionaries in inter-war Bengal. Comprising primarily Croats and Slovenians, this group published in both languages in several missionary journals in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The focus is particularly on one of these publications, Bengalski misijonar, a periodical dedicated to Yugoslav missionary efforts in Bengal, published monthly from 1933 to 1941. The first section of this paper introduces the Bengal mission, its principal figures, and their contributions. The second section explores the structure of the journal, assessing the role of documentary writings within it and their integration with the journal's overall objectives. In the third section, the variety of topics covered in these writings is analysed to determine their scope and the most prominent subjects, with taking into account the narratives and rhetoric employed. The fourth section focuses on the use of visual tools and examines the relationship between the texts and the illustrations. In conclusion, the significance of documentary missionary writings is considered, both in terms of their function within the missionary enterprise and their informational and educational value for the audience back home.

Keywords: Missionary journals, interwar Yugoslav missionaries, Bengal, documentary writing, *Bengalski misijonar*

Introduction

Just a few weeks after various short documentary texts about Bengal tigers, Ganges floods, and captivating, colourful religious festivals were being composed in what was literally a hut in a small village within the poverty- and flood-stricken

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Ganges Delta, they were already being published in *Bengalski misijonar* [Bengal Missionary], a four-page folded insert of *Glasnik presvetega srca Jezusovega*, one of the main Catholic journals in the 1930s Yugoslavia. In these special publications, documentary writing was only one element in the mixture of various genres, including missionary accounts, curia, jokes and illustrations, all richly illustrated with reproductions of photographs from the missions. The insert attracted a large readership, and for many readers, these texts served as their first encounter with the world beyond Europe, narrated and explained by their compatriots who had witnessed these intriguing phenomena firsthand.

Among the various approaches to the missionary endeavour, which range from an appreciative perspective rooted in missionary theology to a critical view that interprets them as agents of colonial enterprise, recent scholarship has illuminated the topic of missionary epistemology from a radically new perspective.[3] Missionaries, who often spent extended periods - sometimes their entire lives - at their missions, gained a profound understanding of local nature, culture, languages, and religion, frequently becoming amateur experts in these subjects before they became the object of any academic study. They also provided scholars in their home countries with botanical and zoological specimens, as well as artifacts of indigenous material culture.[4] While the colonial power dynamics underlying this exchange of knowledge must not be overlooked, the epistemic contributions of these efforts retain value today, as they have sometimes preserved information about geographically and socially remote communities whose realities might otherwise have been lost.

This paper examines one such phenomenon: the diverse and extensive documentary writings of a small group of Yugoslav missionaries in inter-war Bengal. Comprising primarily Croats and Slovenians, this group published and corresponded in both languages, contributing to several missionary journals in what was then the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The focus is particularly on one of these publications, *Bengalski misijonar,*[5] a periodical dedicated specifically to Yugoslav missionary efforts in Ben-

3 Two volumes deserve special mention among several others: The edited volume (eds. Patrick Harries, David Maxwell) *The Spiritual in the Secular: Missionaries and Knowledge about Africa*, which was a result of a 2007 workshop and opened many new venues for exploring these topics; and Harries' own book *Butterflies & Barbarians: Swiss Missionaries & Systems of Knowledge in South-East Africa* (2007).

4 Harries and Maxwell (2012), p. 4.

5 All the further references to the journal are shortened to the year/no. format, with years spanning from I (1933) to IX (1941).

gal, published monthly from 1933 to 1941. The first section of this paper introduces the Bengal mission, its principal figures, and their contributions. The second section explores the structure of the journal, assessing the role of documentary writings within it and their integration with the journal's overall objectives. In the third section, the variety of topics covered in these writings is analysed to determine their scope and the most prominent subjects, with taking into account the narratives and rhetoric employed. The fourth section focuses on the use of visual tools and examines the relationship between the texts and the illustrations. In conclusion, the significance of documentary missionary writings is considered, both in terms of their function within the missionary enterprise and their informational and educational value for the audience back home.[6]

The Yugoslav missionary presence in Bengal began in 1925, when two Croatian Jesuits, Pavao Mesarić and Antun Vizjak, departed for India. Their mission was to assist Belgian missionaries in the remote region of the 24 Parganas, situated in the Ganges delta. They were joined two years later by Vizjak's brother, Josip, and Mihael Šmid, followed three years after by two women missionaries: Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, an Albanian later renowned as Mother Teresa, and Magdalena Kajnč, a Slovenian. In 1929, three additional Jesuits from Slovenia embarked on the mission to Bengal. Within the first decade, over 20 Yugoslav missionaries had been sent to the region.[7] After receiving their formation in the Himalayan town of Kurseong, near Darjeeling, the missionaries began their work in various outposts, starting in Basanti

6 The history and biographies of prominent Yugoslav missionaries have been fairly well explored, although the publications remain mostly limited to the Catholic Church's own informative publications and are rarely done in the form of scientific studies. The exceptions to these are works by Bogdan Kolar, who overviewed the history of Slovenian missionaries in his 1998 monograph and wrote about individual missionaries (e.g. Kolar 1992). The history of Slovenian missionaries outside Europe was also one of the topics of the work by Zmago Šmitek (1986 and 1995). The history of the interwar Yugoslav Jesuit mission in Bengal and later missionaries to India from other religious orders were recorded by Kokalj (1989). History of the Croatian missionaries in Bengal and their significance in the wider framework of Euro-Indian relations is analyzed among others in Ježić (1984) and Andrijanić (2018) and especially in several writings included in the monograph *Croatian-Indian Links: Thirty Chapters for Thirty Years of Diplomatic Relations (1992 – 2022)*: Štefan (2022), Motoh (2022) and Jothi (2022). Most related to the topic of the present paper is the segment of the book by Zorić (2011), which explores the ethnographic writings of Yugoslav missionaries in Bengal are explored in more detail. Research work on Slovenian missionaries to India was published by Jelnikar (2019) and Motoh (2019), including a monograph about the missionary travelogues of two Slovenian missionaries to India in the late 1920s (Jelnikar and Motoh 2021).

7 A few of those returned and some also died soon upon arrival mostly due to epidemic illnesses. For all these information *cf.* Kokalj (1989).

and later expanding to Morapai, Raghabpur, and other locations.[8] Their missionary activities in Bengal were deeply intertwined with efforts to assist the impoverished local population of the Ganges delta. This dual focus is reflected in their writings, which will be analysed later in this study.

Fig. 1: First decade of the Yugoslav missionary presence in Bengal (BM IV/1)

The missionaries established schools and training centres, constructed low-cost housing, introduced technological and agricultural innovations, and organized a communal rice cooperative to support villagers during periods of hunger.[9] Living in these remote areas, they experienced local realities firsthand, which significantly influenced their documentary work. Their reports on local communities included

8 Ibid.

9 *Cf.* ibid., and *Bengalski misijonar* IV/1.

detailed accounts of language, culture, customs, religion, economy, crafts, trade, geography, climate, flora, and fauna - most of which were grounded in personal observation and experience.

In addition to publishing *The Bengal Missionary* in the Slovenian language, the missionaries contributed articles to numerous other Catholic journals. Among these, the Croatian journal *Katoličke misije* (established in 1926) prominently focused on the missionary efforts in India, while the Slovenian journal *Katoliški misijoni* (established in 1923) also regularly featured reports from the region.

Structure of the journal

Each issue of *Bengalski Misijonar* comprised of four pages, typically beginning with a title, photograph, or illustration (further elaboration on this will follow later in the paper). The first page usually - though not invariably - featured reflections on missionary work, often in broader, more general tones. These reflections were frequently accompanied by practical discussions on topics directly related to missionary activities, such as updates on the conditions of specific missionary outposts, the reassignment of missionaries, accounts of their travels, construction of new facilities, and notable celebrations. Additionally, one or more stories detailing the experiences of new converts were often included. This genre, while engaging, tended to be overly dramatic and could serve as a distinct subject for further academic investigation.

The present paper focuses on documentary writing, a genre that frequently occupied the remainder of the journal's four pages, though other genres were also included occasionally. Particularly notable were short humorous accounts, often penned by lay brothers, who, it appears, were either allowed or expected to adopt a less serious and solemn tone than their clerical counterparts. These accounts narrate amusing incidents, such as a swarm of bees inhabiting the statue of Saint Joseph,[10] the chaos caused by Brother France Drobnič while playing with Bengal fire,[11] and the amusing misidentification of Lay Brother Šmit by a local girl as a statue of a saint.[12]

The journal's final section was dedicated to various initiatives aimed at garnering support for the mission, whether through monetary donations, material goods, or prayers. Beyond financial contributions, supporters were encouraged to donate

10 *Bengalski misijonar* IV/5.
11 *Bengalski misijonar* II/4.
12 Ibid. I/3.

items such as old postage stamps and tin foil scraps, which could be sold to raise funds. They were also invited to borrow special moneyboxes, known as "The Little Bengali".[13] These figurines, designed for use in parishes and other public spaces, featured a mechanism whereby the head of the "Little Bengali" would nod whenever a coin was inserted, making them both practical and engaging tools for fundraising efforts. This section of the journal also regularly featured announcements of new Jesuit publications related to the Indian mission. The series Indian Library [Indijska knjižnica] encompassed a diverse range of works, including travelogues, literary compositions, and documentary texts.[14] Notable examples included an overview of religion in Bengal, Stanko Poderžaj's *Bengalčevi bogovi* [Gods of the Bengali],[15] and Danilo Perkan's exploration of women's status in India, *Žena v Indiji* [Woman in India][16]. Most issues of the journal concluded with the slogan "Bengal to Christ," presented in Slovenian, Bengali script, and Bengali transliteration.

Fig. 2: Motto "Bengal to Christ" (BM I/1)

In 1934 and 1935, and occasionally thereafter, an additional picture page titled *Slike iz Indije* [Images from India] was inserted in the *Glasnik Srca Jezusovega* (the main journal) at the conclusion of *Bengalski Misijonar*. This section showcased a variety of sights and culturally significant scenes from India. Beginning with the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta,[17] Slovenian readers were introduced to numerous landmarks and experiences that a traveller to the Indian subcontinent might encounter. These included iconic locations and sceneries such as the Taj Mahal,[18] Mount Evere-

13 One of these is still in the collection of Slovene Ethnographic Museum today.
14 22 volumes were published under this title. *Cf.* Kolar (1998), p. 194.
15 Poderžaj (1936).
16 Perkan (1941).
17 *Bengalski misijonar* II/1. In the paper I use the old name for today's Kolkata, for it was the one in use at the time of the quoted publications. In Slovenian language they used the transliteration »Kalkuta«.
18 Ibid. II/3.

st,[19] the Malabar Coast,[20] and the Jain Temple in Calcutta.[21] The section also featured depictions of Hindu goddesses, missionary centres, and glimpses of domestic life in Indian villages, offering a multifaceted perspective on the region.

Documentary writing: variety of topics

The content of the *Bengalski misijonar*, which primarily pertains to missionary topics, has received some scholarly attention.[22] However, despite occasionally comprising up to half of the journal, its documentary writings have been largely neglected. From the vantage point of a century, the accounts of tigers, leopards, bananas, and the Ganges River no longer hold the same informational significance they once did for pre-WWII readers in Yugoslavia. Nonetheless, the breadth and diversity of these writings remain remarkable, even by contemporary standards. The texts, however, can be recognized today as possessing additional significance. They offer a vivid portrayal of life in the remote regions of early 20th-century India - realities seldom addressed in comparable or more academic writings originating from the centres of colonial power. In doing so, they provide a valuable window into underrepresented and often overlooked temporal and spatial contexts.

Most of these writings can be classified into several categories, which will be analysed further:

1) Geography and climate
2) Society and culture
3) Economy
4) Architecture
5) Religion
6) Language and writing
7) Plants and agriculture
8) Animals
9) Disease
10) Trivia

19 Ibid. II/7.
20 Ibid. III/3.
21 Ibid. III/4.
22 Kolar (1998), p. 194; Motoh (2019), pp. 33–52.

1) Writings on geography and climate were particularly frequent, driven largely by the practical realities of daily life in the missionary outposts. Two locations received especially detailed attention: the Ganges Delta and the Himalayan Darjeeling region. The former was significant as the site of Jesuit missionary outposts, while the latter served as the location for the priests' final stage of formation and occasionally as a place of recovery from tropical illnesses. The geographical and climatic conditions of the Ganges Delta district, specifically the 24 Parganas, appeared harsh and challenging for the newly arrived Jesuit missionaries. Their accounts describe extensive floods, relentless monsoons, the arduous travel through a labyrinth of canals and impassable saline marshes, and the oppressive heat and humidity. The climate and geography of the Himalayan region are also documented, with particular attention given to the characteristics of the monsoon season in the mountains. Additionally, they recorded notable events in the region, such as large fires in July 1935[23] and fears of sea floods (today would be called a tsunami) following the catastrophic earthquake of January 1934[24].

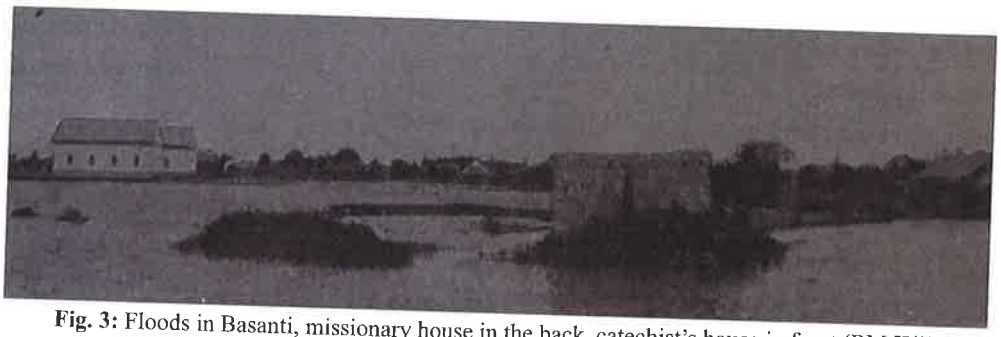

Fig. 3: Floods in Basanti, missionary house in the back, catechist's house in front (BM II/3)

2) Societal and cultural themes are often included in the discussions of missionary work, particularly in the missionaries' analyses of the challenges and experiences of engaging with local communities. These reflections often delve into family structures, traditional norms, and cultural practices. However, numerous articles explicitly dedicated to these topics also exist. Living and working among the poorest strata of the Bengali population, the missionaries frequently focused on the stark social disparities and the relationships between the *zamindars* (land-owning nobility)[25] and impoverished villagers. The caste system is criticized,[26] and the struggles, as well

23 *Bengalski misijonar* V/7.
24 Ibid. II/4.
25 *Bengalski misijonar* III/4, III/7, and V/1.
26 Ibid. II/7 and IV/3.

as the early political movements of the Dalit outcast community,[27] are discussed. The missionaries also delve into more ethnological and cultural topics, including traditional clothing such as the *dhoti*[28], the significance of jewellery,[29] the use of umbrellas by men as status symbols,[30] the locals' reluctance to be photographed,[31] and the ubiquitous »holy cows«[32]. They mention the importance of street theatre and their ambiguous relation to it.[33]

3) The economy is referenced only sporadically, with particular emphasis on the distinct types of economic relations in Bengal. A notable exception is the five-part essay on the economic conditions in Chota Nagpur authored by Janez Ribaš.[34] This essay specifically examines the causes of rural poverty in India, elucidates the relationship between the zamindars and impoverished farmers, and suggests several potential interventions by the missionaries.

4) The missionaries, while actively engaged in constructing their own churches and related buildings, also observed local building practices. These observations, combined with the extensive photographic archive, offer valuable insights into how villagers designed and constructed their homes and other structures. Their accounts detail the materials, construction processes, structural characteristics of rural houses in Bengal and even superstition related to the building process.[35] Although not technically exhaustive, these descriptions serve as an intriguing complement to the numerous photographs that were published.

5) As part of their formation, Jesuit missionaries received education on the fundamental characteristics of local religions even before departing Europe. It is therefore unsurprising that this topic captured their interest, evoking both fascination and disdain. Stanko Poderžaj, author of the separate printed volume *Gods of the Bengali,* was particularly prolific in this area. Despite the generally critical perspective on

27 Ibid. VII/7.
28 Ibid. IV/8 and III/4.
29 Ibid. III/7.
30 Ibid. VI/1.
31 Ibid. II/12 and VI/5.
32 Ibid. IV/11.
33 The missionaries report leveraging the locals' love of theatrical performances (BM III/10) by incorporating numerous theatrical elements into their missionary activities. However, they also recount an instance where they ventured through the woods in the middle of the night to prevent a "pagan theatre performance" from taking place (BM VIII/). No further details about this latter event are provided.
34 Ibid. VIII/5–9.
35 Ibid. I/11, II/11, and IX/2.

Hindu religious ideas and practices, these writings introduced several novel concepts to European audiences, such as the notion of reincarnation,[36] the plurality of deities in Hinduism,[37] and the significance of the Vedic scriptures.[38] Furthermore, the texts frequently addressed India's multireligious landscape, including conflicts between Hindu and Muslim communities,[39] while also offering critical commentary on the contentious relationship between Protestants and Catholics.[40]

6) The language and writing showcased in the printed presentation of the slogan *"Bengal to Christ"* were accompanied by dedicated articles that explored various picturesque Bengali phrases and expressions,[41] situating them within India's broader linguistic landscape.

7) Agricultural practices in the Ganges Delta were largely unfamiliar to the missionaries. The agricultural calendar, dictated by alternating monsoon and dry seasons, resulted in modest and unreliable yields, primarily due to the high salinity of the soil and unpredictable weather conditions, including frequent flooding. Rice cultivation, in particular, garnered significant attention in their writings, as they considered the entire process of rice farming intriguing for their readership back home. In an article titled *"The Country of Daily Rice,"*[42] they elaborated on the central role rice played in the daily life of Bengal. The missionaries also wrote extensively about practical measures they implemented to enhance food security during times of hardship, notably the establishment of a communal rice cooperative.[43] Beyond this primary staple, which was both a practical and cultural concern, they undertook the task of introducing their readership to fruits and plants unfamiliar in their homeland. They documented in detail the characteristics of bananas, mangoes, guavas, papayas, and coconut trees,[44] as well as bamboo[45] and palm trees, the latter being used for wine production.[46] Interestingly, the missionaries had first-hand experience with agriculture. They attempted to grow European fruits but achieved limited success. Notably,

36 Ibid. II/6.
37 Ibid. IV/10.
38 Ibid. I/10.
39 Ibid. IX/2.
40 Ibid. I/5, IV/11, V/5, and VIII/6.
41 Ibid. II/12, III/5, III/6, and VII/8.
42 Ibid. II/5.
43 Ibid. I/11, II/5, II/9, and IV/2.
44 Ibid. II/9 and III/12.
45 Ibid. IV/3.
46 Ibid. IV/5.

one of them, lay brother Janez Udovč, stationed in Darjeeling, excelled in cultivating flowers and even received awards for his roses,[47] which the journal regularly reported on. Tea cultivation in Darjeeling also appears in photographs.[48]

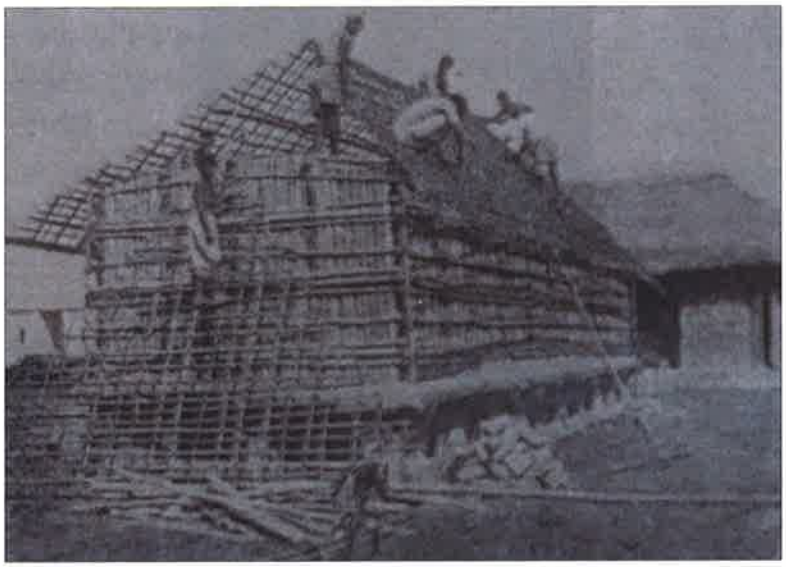

Fig. 4: Construction of the building of the mission's communal rice collective (BM I/11)

8) Animals were also a compelling topic for missionary writing, not only because of the missionaries' real exposure to unfamiliar and potentially dangerous fauna but also due to the appeal such stories held for their readership back home. Encounters with tigers, whether firsthand or relayed through local accounts, were often written in a serious tone. These narratives sometimes took the form of adventure stories, detailing tiger hunts and identifying the most enthusiastic hunters in the village.[49] Among the "tiger stories," however, some adopt a humorous undertone, particularly those involving Brother France. His hunting exploits often ended in unexpected outcomes: on one occasion, he shot a crocodile, which was subsequently lost and later found and sold by locals down the river;[50] on another, he allegedly shot what he thought was a tiger but turned out to be a small leopard.[51] The leopard skin, along with other animal specimens - including a small tiger and a snake (referred to as "Indijski modras," meaning

47 Ibid. II/8.
48 Ibid. IV/5.
49 Ibid. I/1, II/7, III/3, IV/7 and VI/1.
50 Ibid. II/2.
51 Ibid. II/10.

Indian horned viper) that attacked Stanko Poderžaj[52] - were among the many items the missionaries provided for their "Indian Museum" in Ljubljana.

Fig. 5: France Drobnič caught a leopard (BM III/3);

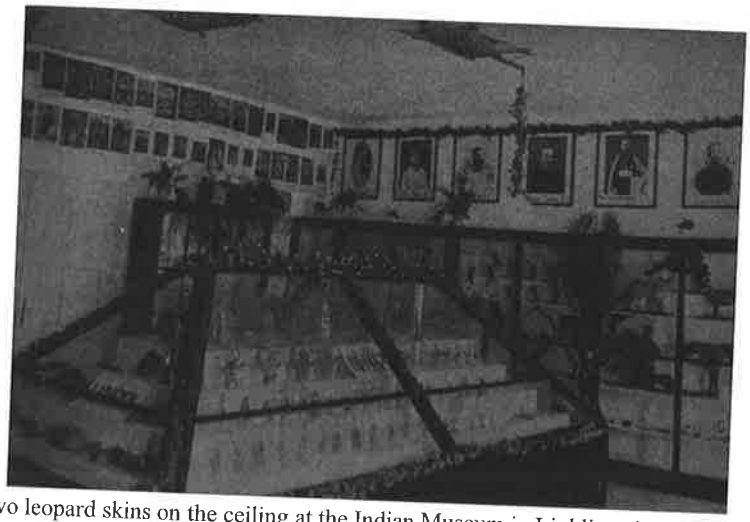

Fig. 6: Two leopard skins on the ceiling at the Indian Museum in Ljubljana in 1935 (BM III/11)

In contrast to the adventurous tiger narratives, accounts of snakes are more realistic, reflecting the missionaries' firsthand experiences. Cobras and snake charmers are mentioned frequently, with accusations that the charmers deceived audiences by removing the snakes' fangs.[53] Two other types of animals noted in their writings

52 Ibid. II/7.
53 Ibid. VI/9, VII/2.

relate to everyday nuisances: leeches[54] and insects[55] and other animals are mentioned also for their interaction with the humans: monkeys[56] and mongooses.[57]

9) Disease was one of the greatest perils of missionary life. Most missionaries reported suffering from bouts of malaria in the marshy regions of the Ganges Delta, describing in detail the preventive measures they adopted, such as using mosquito nets and consuming quinine.[58] They also documented cases of cholera, often occurring in epidemic proportions,[59] attributing its prevalence to the lack of clean drinking water in the region.[60] Plague, typhoid and skin diseases[61] were also frequently mentioned, as was an epidemic of a disease they referred to as *"džin džin"*.[62]

10) The missionaries considered it their duty to assist the local population with health concerns. As Lojze Demšar articulated in an article detailing his medical care activities, *"A missionary is not only a doctor for souls but also a doctor for bodies"*.[63] However, most medical care was provided not by male missionaries but by missionary sisters. In the Yugoslav missionary region in Bengal, the leading figure in this effort was the aforementioned Magdalena Kajnč, who organized a highly efficient dispensary.[64]

Fig. 7: Magdalena Kajnč in front of her dispensary (BM III/5)

54 Ibid, II/9, V/1.
55 Ibid. II/11.
56 Ibid. IX/2.
57 Ibid. VIII/7.
58 Ibid. II/4.
59 Ibid III/6, IV/2, IV/11, and V/1.
60 Ibid. I/4.
61 Ibid. II/11.
62 Ibid. IV/5.
63 Ibid. VI/10.
64 *Cf.* Jelnikar (2019), pp. 7-13. and Kokalj Ĩ(1989), pp. 48–49.

11) While most of the documentary topics in the journal were serious and treated by the authors with intent and precision, the overall structure was made more engaging by the inclusion of trivia - very short articles detailing entertaining, surprising, exotic, or humorous events and facts. This genre exhibited a surprising range and drew upon diverse sources, many of which are now difficult to trace. Among these stories are numerous accounts involving Brother France, such as how he practiced throwing "bombs"[65] (possibly firecrackers) for New Year's Eve and ended up losing half of his beard and moustache, or how he cooked Carniolan sausages for the priests in Kurseong.[66] Other articles recount amusing incidents, such as when a local mistook one of the missionaries for a church statue and worshipped at his feet.[67] Some pieces critically explore the traditional and religious customs of the local population, employing humorous language to do so. These include accounts of animal burial rituals (for a monkey and a dog)[68] and the marriage of trees.[69] India, or specifically Bengal, is often portrayed as an exotic land that defies the missionaries' logic, a theme most vividly captured by Stanko Poderžaj in his article *"India, the Upside-Down World"*.[70] In a semi-humorous text he explores what he sees as the illogicalities of Indian culture, where everything is opposite from what a European would expect: from the way the letters are aligned (on top instead of bottom) to the way shirts are worn (outside the pants instead of tucked in).

Visual Tools

The complex interplay between domesticating the foreign reality through description and explication, and simultaneously exoticizing it, is also evident in the use of diverse and rich visual material. Each issue of the journal featured at least a few photographs, often accompanied by hand-drawn maps, diagrams, and charts that illustrated the content of the articles. Occasionally, these visual elements stood independently, unconnected to the articles' topics. From their accounts, we know the missionaries had at least two cameras with them. The portion of their mostly lost photographic archive preserved by the Slovene Ethnographic Museum sug-

65 *Bengalski misijonar* II/4.
66 Ibid. VI/5.
67 Ibid. I/3.
68 Ibid. III/4 and VI/4.
69 Ibid. VI/7.
70 Ibid. IV/12.

gests that most published photographs were reproductions of those taken by the missionaries themselves.

A significant portion of the photographs in *Bengalski misijonar* documented missionary activities. These images recorded the construction of churches, schools, and residential buildings in the Basanti and Morapai outposts, showcased the missionaries' teaching efforts, and featured local catechists and converts. Special events, such as visits by church dignitaries, religious processions, and natural disasters like floods and fires, were also captured. Villages were frequently depicted alongside commentaries on their landscapes and architecture, while the images also portrayed the missionaries' rudimentary chapels and living spaces. The photographs also featured various locations where the missionaries resided or travelled, including not only Basanti and Morapai but also other outposts established later. Additionally, many images depicted the Himalayan region of Kurseong, where priests underwent formation. Among these were photographs of Hindu and Buddhist temples, rituals, and deities. Numerous images of children and local inhabitants highlighted ethnological details such as jewellery, clothing, agricultural practices, tools, and other cultural activities.

The missionaries themselves were frequently the subject of these photographs, often depicted at the time of their departure for or arrival in India. Priests were typically shown at key milestones, such as ordination and their first Mass, most of which took place in Kurseong upon completing their studies. Women missionaries were similarly photographed upon arrival in India, with those stationed in Bengal continuing to appear in subsequent visual material. Photographs also showed the new converts and especially the catechists.

Fig. 8: "Catechist Sušil" (BM VII/4)

As *Bengalski misijonar* was an insert in the Jesuit journal *Glasnik presvetega srca Jezusovega*, it lacked its own title page. Instead, the upper third of the first page was designed as a title section. These designs varied significantly over the nine years of the journal's publication, reflecting not only editorial policies and agendas but also the availability of materials and the development of technological resources back home. Additionally, they mirrored the rapidly shifting historical realities of that decade. The first issue featured a title page with a meaningful drawing. It depicted two figures - a man, likely representing a missionary, and a child - standing in a mountainous landscape with huts and palm trees. The missionary is shown extending his right arm, pointing toward a cross that shines among the palm trees. The imagery is notably stereotypical, even for a missionary publication of that period. The depiction of the converted peoples of Bengal, represented by a black-skinned child being led toward the light by a white (and white-dressed) missionary, reflects the patriarchal and racial stereotypes of its time to a pronounced degree, much more than what was typical in the journal's written content.

Fig. 9: The title drawing of the first issue of *Bengalski misijonar* (BM I/1)

In the second issue of *Bengalski misijonar*, the initial drawing was replaced by a photograph of Stanko Poderžaj in his room. This marked the beginning of a consistent practice of featuring representative photographs, typically accompanied by brief captioned titles, which continued until 1939. The subjects alternated between missionary themes, ethnological imagery, and even representations of local religious practices.

Two years before the journal ceased publication, the editors introduced a new tradition: presenting a photograph of a missionary or other notable figure alongside a short caption in the title design. This began with Constantin Lievens, a renowned late 19th-century Belgian Jesuit missionary in India, and Ferdinand Perier, the Archbishop of Calcutta, followed by a series of 14 Yugoslav missionaries, including both priests and lay brothers. Subsequent figures featured included Rabindranath Tagore, toward whom the missionaries held an ambiguous attitude, and Babu Banerjee, the architect of the Church of Saint Theresa in Basanti.

The shift from documentary imagery to reused photographic portraits is significant. This change, introduced in April 1939, coincided with the entry of British India into World War II. The war disrupted postal services, making communication between the Indian mission and the Slovenian printing press less reliable and slower. Consequently, the flow of new photographic material diminished, and its transport became increasingly challenging.

In the final issues, the journal alternated between featuring portraits and reproductions of drawings and paintings. Notably, the last issue, published in February 1941, just before the war took over Yugoslavia as well, returned - likely intentionally - to a drawing design reminiscent of the first issue in 1933. This final title design depicted a figure on horseback riding toward a light emanating from an "oriental" style building with two towers and a gate. While the iconography is somewhat ambiguous, the overarching theme of journeying toward the light (or perhaps the Holy Land) is evident. A smaller illustration featuring palm trees complements the composition, referencing the exotic landscapes of the missions.

Fig. 10: The title drawing of the last issue of *Bengalski misijonar* (BM IX/2)

Between the familiar and the exotic

While the writings on missionary topics in *Bengalski misijonar* were generally straightforward in content and unambiguous in attitude, the documentary writing, which sometimes occupied half or more of the journal, displayed a markedly different structure and tone. Highly diverse in subject matter, it ranged from geography and climate to religion, societal issues, and natural phenomena, covering topics as varied as tigers, Buddhist monasteries, cholera, and floods. This section also demonstrated considerable ingenuity in its approaches, addressing topics through dry, descriptive styles, humorous storytelling, critical analysis, or enthusiastic narration, often enriched with detailed photographic material.

Most significantly, the documentary writing served as a powerful tool in the missionary press. Beyond promoting the missionary cause for religious reasons, it aimed to captivate and fascinate readers, drawing them into the missionary project through curiosity and the pursuit of knowledge. The manner in which these topics were presented revealed an intriguing ambiguity, crafted to engage a highly heterogeneous audience back home. By portraying the realities of 1930s Bengal as both comparable to and incomprehensible within the readers' context, the journal created an interpretative space where its rhetoric could thrive.

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