

Burrus, Nanibala Biswas (c. 1885–1958)

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Nanibala Biswas, born in 1885 in a high caste Hindu family in Calcuta (Kolkata), was the first non-Christian to accept the Adventist message in India in 1896.

Nanibala's contact with Adventists began with Georgia Burrus, when the first Adventist missionary to India stopped at her home in 1896 as she made her rounds among the *zenanas*¹ of Calcutta visiting girl students of the Adventist School and attempting to recruit new ones. Nanibala was only about eleven years old, apparently already a widow,² a victim to the custom of child marriage prevalent at that time.

Nanibala showed a keen interest in the songs and the Bible stories Burrus taught and urged her to return. After a few months of these visits Nanibala refused to worship the idols in their home. This angered her father who locked up Nanibala and threatened to kill her if she tried to escape. He also barred Georgia or any Adventist from visiting his home or seeing his daughter. However, one night while others were sleeping, a sympathetic aunt helped Nanibala climb over the compound wall with the help of a ladder, and escape to the nearby Adventist Mission where Georgia lived³

Nanibala's father tried all he could to get her back, but failed. Once he even recruited the services of a lady working with another large Christian denomination to retrieve Nanibala from the Adventists. The lady arrived at the Adventist Mission in an impressive carriage and announced that she now held Nanibala's custody, as per her father's wish, and promised Nanibala all that she needed, including a good education. The 11-year old refused to accept the offer⁴ and chose to stay with the Adventist Mission, and was eventually baptized.

Meanwhile, Georgia Burrus arranged for Nanibala's education and stay in the Adventist Mission. In recognition of how her life was shaped to love Jesus and serve Him, Nanibala adopted Burrus as her last name. After sometime she was accepted into the nurses training program operated by Dr. O. G. Place. When the doctor's family left for home, Nanibala joined the family⁵ and accompanied them to the United States where she continued her nursing studies first briefly at the Glendale Sanitarium and then more extensively at the Battle Creek Sanitarium⁶ Finally she also trained as a masseuse in Boston.⁷ Circumstances suggested that it was prudent for her not to return to India. She settled in Attleboro, Massachusetts, and opened a health center and massage institute.⁸ In appreciation for the care she received in her youth, Nanibala helped many young people in their struggle to attend college. Nanibala passed away on December 4, 1958.⁹



Nanibala Burrus, c. 1898.
Photo courtesy of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists Archives.

SOURCES

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Spicer, W. A. "Some Facts About Early Work in India." *Eastern Tidings*, Pioneer Number Extra, May 8, 1941.

NOTES

1. These were enclosed portions of homes in India where women were secluded.?
2. Mrs. L. J. Burgess, "The Blessed Pioneer," *Eastern Tidings*, May 8, 1941 (Pioneer Number Extra), 3. Georgia Burrus married L. J. Burgess in 1903.?
3. Ibid.?
4. Ibid.?
5. Though she joined the family of the doctor, Nanibala adopted the name "Burrus" in honour of the one who brought her into the truth.?
6. Gordon Christo, "Anywhere with Jesus," *ARH*, World Edition, Jan 10, 2002, 23.?
7. "Noni B. Burrus," Obituary, *ARH*, February 26, 1959, 26.?
8. "Noonibala Burros [sic.] Visits Seventh-day Campgrounds," *Attleboro Sun*, July 17, 1954.?
9. "Noni B. Burrus," Obituary.?

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