

Burgess, Georgia (Burrus) (1866–1948)

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Georgia Burrus Burgess was the first Adventist missionary to India (including present India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) and the first single-woman missionary of the Adventist church to a non-Christian country. She pioneered the work in Bengal, Punjab, the foothills of the Himalayas and Meghalaya. She learnt several Indian languages and was foremost in urging other missionaries to learn local languages.



Georgia and Luther Burgess

Photo courtesy of Lucy Kharkongor.

Early years: Preparation for Mission Service (1866-1905)

Georgia Anna Burrus was born July 19, 1866.¹ Despite family opposition she joined the Adventist church at age 16 and enrolled as a working student at Healdsburg College in California. She then taught in the Bible Training School in Oakland.² While engaged as a Bible Worker she responded to a call by S. N. Haskell for women to work in *zenanas*³ in India. In 1893 the General Conference voted to send her and Myrtle Griggs to India. Georgia enrolled for the nursing course at St Helena and then a special class at Battle Creek that prepared workers for foreign mission service. Myrtle's poor health led her to drop out of her India plans. Georgia herself had some medical issues but recovered and she took that as a sign of God's care and guidance.⁴

At the conclusion of the year of preparation and additional weeks of waiting Georgia joined a party of workers bound for South America sailing via London. There she was expected to join D. A. Robinson who had been appointed the first superintendent of the work to begin in India. However Robinson had decided not to sail till the following year, and Georgia proceeded to India alone with the understanding that the General Conference Mission Board would pay her fare and she would support herself by selling literature or teaching while learning the local language. She sailed on the SS Bengal in December 1894 and arrived in Calcutta (Kolkata) on January 23, 1895.⁵

In Calcutta Georgia Burrus found accommodation at the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and began Bengali language study with a pundit. When her finances ran out she received funds from a South African arranged by Stephen Haskell. During her spare time Georgia visited women living in *zenanas*, made friends at the YWCA, and paved the way for Adventist work. Towards the end of the year she rented a bungalow for the small group of Adventist missionaries who arrived in November.⁶

Later Years: A Life of Pioneering (1896-1948)

Georgia Burrus and Martha May Taylor who arrived with the Robinsons organized the first Adventist school in India. With some assistance from her pundit Georgia taught in Bengali. Kheroda Bose, who joined Georgia in teaching at the school, was the first to be baptized. Nanibala, whom Georgia had visited regularly, was the first non-Christian to be baptized. Thus the first two baptisms in India were a direct result of Georgia's witness.⁷

In 1902 Georgia married Luther Burgess who was sent a year earlier to India Mission as Secretary and Treasurer. The simple ceremony was conducted by J. L. Shaw at the Adventist chapel on Free School Street, Calcutta. The following year Luther Burgess gave up his office and the couple moved to Karmatar to care for the school and orphanage there. They moved back to the US in the middle of 1904 because of Luther's poor health. Since the Mission Board lacked funds to send them back to India, they came up with a plan to sell 20,000 copies of the *Bible Training School* (at 10 cents each) to raise the amount needed. During the months back home they spoke to many audiences raising funds for mission and school work and for students' fees.⁸

Upon their return in 1906 they moved to the northwest part of India. They learnt Hindustani and pioneered the work in Almora, Dehradun, Najibabad, and Patiala in Garwhal and Punjab. John Last, their first Punjabi convert, was the first martyr of the Adventist church in India. The Burgesses played an important role in the 1907 conference which assigned workers to all corners of the country and urged them to learn the local language. The Burgesses returned to the Northwest. In 1910 they established the Garwhal Industrial School, near Dehra Dun.⁹

In 1914 Georgia's health problems forced them back to California for a few months. When they returned to India they were placed in Calcutta where Luther was appointed Superintendent of the Bengal Mission. They led out in establishing new headquarters for the Mission at 6 Dihi Serampur Road, and established a Bengali Girls' School

in Calcutta.

In 1919 the Burgesses visited Shillong, a hill station at an elevation of about 5000 ft, where they conducted evangelistic meetings in the Hardinge home. Earlier Georgia had led the Hardinges to the truth in Calcutta. The Burgesses also assisted in establishing the work in Ranchi and Hazaribagh in the 1920s.¹⁰ From there they moved to Shillong where they pioneered work among Khasi speaking people. Failing health finally forced the couple in 1934 to return permanently to the US where they settled near Paradise Valley Sanitarium in National City, California. Georgia passed to her rest on September 25, 1948.¹¹

Contribution and Legacy

Georgia will be remembered as the first Adventist missionary to the Indian subcontinent, and the first single Adventist woman to venture into a non-Christian country. At a time when people hesitated to learn foreign languages, Georgia showed the way learning Bengali and Hindustani and pioneering the work among the Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, and the Khasi speaking people of India.

The earliest conversions in India resulted from Georgia's witness. The church in what is now known as Bangladesh, then part of India, traces its learning about the Sabbath to a tract Georgia handed out at the Calcutta railway station. A vegetarian recipe book she arranged for led to the conversion of the Hardinge family. A faithful chronicler, Georgia regularly reported her work in the *Eastern Tidings*, the *Review and Herald*, the *Pacific Union Recorder*, and the *Bible Training School*.

SOURCES

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NOTES

1. "Obituaries," "Burgess," *Pacific Union Recorder*, Oct 25, 1948, 11.
2. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Burgess, Georgia Anna (Burrus)."
3. The portion of a home in India where women were secluded.
4. Georgia Burgess, "Why I Went to India," *Bible Training School*, June 1916, 5-6.
5. Gordon Christo, "Georgia Burrus (1895)," *New Southern Asia Tidings*, November 2010 (1910 Heritage Special Issue), 15-16.
6. Mrs. L J Burgess, "The Blessed Pioneer," *Eastern Tidings*, May 8, 1941 (Pioneer Number Extra), 2-4.
7. *Ibid.*, 4; L G Mookerjee, "Georgia Burgess: Pioneer Missionary (Obituary)," *Eastern Tidings*, Oct 15, 1948, 6.
8. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia* (1996), s.v. "Burgess, Georgia Anna (Burrus)." The exact date of the marriage is not known. Mookerjee reports it as 1902 or 1903. However, from the minutes of the India Mission and from the Yearbook entries, it appears the marriage was in late 1902.
9. Georgia A Burgess, "The Garwhal School," *Eastern Tidings* September 1910, 2.
10. Mookerjee, 6.
11. The obituary in the *Pacific Union Recorder* states that she died on Sept. 25 in National City, whereas the obituary in the *Eastern Tidings* records her death as on Sept. 19 at the Paradise Valley Sanitarium.

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