

Gopalganj Seventh-day Adventist Hospital (1906–1985)

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Gopalganj Seventh-day Adventist Hospital was a medical institution located in the southwestern part of the Bhil Delta area of East Bengal (now Bangladesh). It was one of the oldest mission stations in India,¹ and it operated from 1906 until 1985.

Founding

The Adventist mission in East Bengal was started when an American missionary, John L. Shaw, was sent to India to be the director of the India Mission. There he met a Hindu convert named Krishna D. Poddar, who already knew about the Saturday Sabbath message from a printed paper he received at the Sealdah Railway Station. The paper was part of a tract published by Georgia A. Burrus from Akhoy Mookerjee Press. Poddar started preaching and keeping the Sabbath with about 13 families, without knowing about the Seventh-day Adventist Church.² Having heard about the plan to build a mission station from J. L. Shaw, Akhoy C. Mookerjee sent his son, Lal G. Mookerjee,³ to East Bengal in 1906. L. G. Mookerjee bought 1.3 acres of land and built, at his own expense, the Gopalganj Mission Station and other buildings, such as a church, dispensary, his own dwelling, and homes for other national workers. The mission work continued as the new mission station was built in Gopalganj.

Several missionaries from Calcutta—such as L. J. Burgess, A. G. Watson, John C. Little, and many others—came to visit Gopalganj.⁴ They were active in evangelism and visiting people in the villages. Mookerjee left Bengal due to the health issues of his wife, Grace M. Kellogg. He was replaced by A. G. Watson, an Anglo-Indian dentist. When Watson left Gopalganj, the mission workers at Gopalganj, J. L. Shaw and L. J. Burgess, observed that many children and others were sick.⁵ They decided to look for a missionary with medical knowledge and experience. Soon afterward, C. C. Kellar and his wife, who was a nurse, were sent to Gopalganj to start the medical work.⁶ In 1906 the medical mission was established.⁷ Many Hindus and Muslims, as well as mission workers, benefited from the medical services.⁸

History and Development

The local evangelists and nurses operated the dispensary until a physician, Dr. Charles F. Schilling, took charge of it in 1929.⁹ Shilling observed the urgent need to provide medical aid throughout the district of East Bengal, where Malaria, Cholera, Kala-azar, and Tuberculosis decimated the population by the tens of thousands.¹⁰ He then planned to build a hospital a few miles north of Gopalganj. In 1932 the hospital was moved to Jalirpur.¹¹ Dr. Schilling left Bangladesh due to his wife's serious sickness and his successor, H. G. Herbard, operated the hospital for four years. From 1936 to 1942 Joseph Johannes and his wife, Winifred, joined the medical mission.¹² None of the nearly 250 patients who showed up daily were turned away from the little dispensary which measured 10 feet by 12 feet.¹³ The chaplain cared for the patients' spiritual needs and used the Sabbath School Picture Roll. In addition, each patient received literature written in their mother tongue.¹⁴ As time passed, a well-equipped building was erected at no expense to the mission.¹⁵

In 1939 the Northeast Union Committee in North India decided to repurpose the two stations. Because of frequent floods and transportation difficulties, the school in Gopalganj needed to relocate.¹⁶ Hence, the hospital building in Jalirpur became the Bengal Mission High School and hostel, while the hospital work was transferred to Gopalganj. W. B. Votaw was instrumental in the building operation.¹⁷ A new foundation, at some distance from the doctors' residential bungalow, was constructed with an appropriation from the division.

The new location caused challenges to the hospital, as it was on the fringe of the storm area. Gopalganj is located where two great rivers, Ganges and Brahmaputra, join together before emptying into the Bay of Bengal.¹⁸ Heavy rains and the overflow of rivers often inundate the entire Bay of Bengal.¹⁹ For most of the year, the water rises 9-12 feet. Such conditions required pillars several feet tall on which to build the hospital. Water transportation was necessary, since no bicycles or wheeled vehicles of any kind could reach the hospital.²⁰ Roads ended about 20 miles from Gopalganj, and a four-hour trip was necessary to reach the hospital by *Nokas* (riverboat) or launch.²¹ The hospital was known for miles around. However, the difficulties of communication and of crossing the interlaced waterways of the East Pakistan area hindered patients from going to the hospital. They often waited until their illness was critical.²² When the river was low, patients did not come until the water rose.²³

Joseph Johannes initially set up the 20-bed hospital.²⁴ The hospital was always more than full and the workers running the hospital had all the work they could do. The outpatient department was especially busy.²⁵ In addition, spiritual activities were conducted for the patients and people in the vicinity of the hospital. Several people gave their lives to Christ through baptism.²⁶ When Johannes and his wife went on furlough, no physician was available to replace them.²⁷ For a time there was no doctor, then came World War II and financial issues, so the hospital was temporarily closed in 1942.²⁸

Although the hospital was closed, the mission committee decided to carry on the dispensary part of the medical work. Surendra N. Arinda,²⁹ one of the local people who had worked with the doctors for several years,

volunteered to operate the dispensary with local staff—Chitta R. Bo⁸⁰ and Atul C. Bol, who served the hospital for 36 years.³¹ Even without foreign missionaries and doctors, the number of patients ranged from 40 to 50 per day. The local workers continued the Wednesday dispensary work in the surrounding villages, which Pastor Hunter had initiated in 1935. With the permission of the state manager, the village temple accommodated the dispensary work. Tarini C. Bairagee, the Gopalganj Hospital chaplain at the time, accompanied the team to preach about Christ in the temple and to share tracts with those who could read. The team left early in the morning and returned home at 9:00 pm or 10:00 pm, despite the danger of crossing the river in a small boat.³² Every Sabbath provided an opportunity to preach in the villages.³³ Several Sabbath School branches were created and became evangelizing agencies. A medical compounder, Atul C. Bol, took charge of the hospital, in the absence of a physician, until he retired about 19 years later. In 1952 Pastor R. S. Farnando, a non-medical professional from Sri Lanka, took care of the dispensary with the help of a local medical trainee.³⁴ In 1955 S. N. Arinda and in 1957 Chitta Ranjan Bol left the mission hospital to work in private practice. A non-medical professional, Pastor Teshier, assumed responsibility for the hospital between 1956 and 1959.³⁵

In mid-1961 a woman physician from New Zealand, Dr. Marjorie Young, joined Gopalganj Hospital. She was at first appalled by the conditions and the challenges.³⁶ But, Dr. Young had a missionary spirit amid the loneliness and lack of facilities in the rural areas of East Pakistan. Her priority was to repair the surgery section.³⁷ One month after her arrival, "the institution had already been transformed from a rusted-out, dilapidated shell to a well-ordered institution."³⁸ O. W. Lange reported, "Dr. Young has put heart and soul into her project. Old furnishings gleamed like new. Old, but good, hospital beds shone with new enamel, instruments glittered like new in spotless cabinets."³⁹ Near the end of 1961 the hospital was back to full operation after the re-opening ceremony. The hospital flourished and could take inpatients. Facilities for doing major surgery were available.⁴⁰ The spiritual ministry continued and a third branch Sabbath School was started.⁴¹ Although Dr. Young's tenure lasted for only a year, she provided relief to thousands of suffering people in Southern Asia.⁴²

A nurse, Harold Googe, took charge of the dispensary the following year.⁴³ A diesel engine and generator were purchased to provide electricity for the hospital and compound. In 1965 a 39-foot-long launch, named *M. L. Adventist*, was purchased to facilitate medical outreach.⁴⁴ Robindra N. Sarker, an x-ray specialist, joined the hospital in 1967. Before the arrival of a new

physician from the US, Dr. Patience F. Noecker, the dispensary work was under the supervision of an Australian nurse, L. N. Powrie. Dr. Noecker saw the need for major repairs and an office in which to store records properly. He worked with staff to build a strong institution.⁴⁵ However, his term only lasted for ten months due to his illness.⁴⁶ The local staff, under the leadership of Powrie, continued the dispensary work until another American physician, Dr. James Van Blaricum, arrived in 1969.⁴⁷

James Van Blaricum, an American doctor, volunteered to serve in Gopalganj for two years. He revived the spirits of the medical workers to reopen the Gopalganj Hospital.⁴⁸ During his tenure, the institution was in its best

condition. James and his family “have transformed the tumbled-down wreck and brush infected compound into a beautiful institution.”⁴⁹ On September 27, 1970, the Gopalganj Seventh-day Adventist Hospital was officially reopened.⁵⁰ Keith Canwell and Ron Wilkinson, student missionaries from Walla Walla College, helped in the reopening process.⁵¹ When a violent tornado lashed the Gopalganj district in the early 1970s, crops and homes in the coastal areas were devastated. Providentially, the hospital escaped damage from the storm.⁵² The hospital workers cared for hundreds of injured people streaming in for medical attention.⁵³ The following year, James returned to the USA due to the unsettled situation of the Liberation War of Independence in East Pakistan.⁵⁴ His return to the United States was reinforced by the minor accident which was sustained by his son who survived a bullet shot from the Pakistani army. This happened as the family was on a speed boat from Dhaka to Gopalganj. That led to the closure of the hospital again. Powrie continued the dispensary work until a new physician arrived.⁵⁵

Dr. Francis D. Solivio, a Filipino residency surgeon,⁵⁶ came to Gopalganj in early 1973 to be director of the hospital. Solivio had to do emergency surgery on a woman with a strangulated hernia the first night he arrived. At that time there were an average of 30 patients a day.⁵⁷ Dr. Abelardo Osoria and Dr. Magdalena Guerrero arrived a few months later. Dr. Solivio saw the great potential for a strong medical work in the hospital. His strategy was to run the hospital with fewer personnel so that the income from the patients could be used to renovate and expand the facilities.⁵⁸ He was convinced that “unless the physical plant is improved, it will not be possible to attract trained personnel to come here to work.”⁵⁹ The hospital was firmly re-established with a new 36-bed wing to accommodate in-patients. It was largely built from local income, which exceeded Rs. 400,000 the previous year.⁶⁰ Since its reopening in 1973, the hospital improved services and gained income.⁶¹ The hospital was under the care of a Filipino missionary-minded team: Dr. Abelardo T. Osario, a specialist in Orthopedics,⁶² served as chief of the clinic and general practitioner; Pedro J. Pasco was the hospital business manager and, at the same time, served Kellogg-Mookerjee school.⁶³ The *ML Adventist* was sold in 1973, given that the medical launch could not be maintained.⁶⁴ Significant developments took place during Solivio’s tenure: an MA Siemens x-ray unit was in operation,⁶⁵ a newly expanded wing provided in-patient wards and private rooms, the nursing staff increased with Bengali nurses coming from Karachi SDA Hospital and local government private hospitals,⁶⁶ and the hospital was upgraded to a 50-bed hospital in 1976. In 1978 Dr. Solivio was given permanent return by the General Conference.

Dr. Robert Bairagee William, the first national physician, joined Gopalganj Adventist Hospital as soon as he finished his medical degree in 1983. He served as assistant business manager under Sleeter. Dr. Nalini Bayen, the first national dentist, also joined the hospital in 1983. After Sleeter left, F. P. Noecker, an elderly volunteer, arrived in 1984.⁶⁷ She died in a motorcycle accident while driving in Nepal. In February 1985 Gopalganj Hospital was closed due to a lack of financial support and medical personnel.⁶⁸ After the hospital’s closure, the building was used as the South Bangladesh Mission headquarters.⁶⁹

Historical Role

Gopalganj SDA Hospital played a great role in Bangladesh as the only hospital which furnished qualified medical help in the district of Faridpur.⁷⁰ At that time, only 40 hospitals with a total of 100 beds were available in the district with 3,000,000 people.⁷¹ Patients within a 50-mile radius used to come to Gopalganj for treatment. Several stories are recorded about God's leading and miraculous healings through the medical ministry.⁷²

The Seventh-day Adventists were recognized in Bangladesh as being cooperative and providing humanitarian assistance because of the influence of Gopalganj Hospital, two high schools, and the Seventh-day Adventist Welfare Services (SAWS).⁷³ The hospital provided relief programs for the community in the vicinity and across the rivers, to those who were victims of frequent tidal waves.⁷⁴ In collaboration with the Church, the hospital gave medical attention, provided emergency aid, and distributed welfare items in the stricken area.⁷⁵ Despite the tragedies of political unrest,⁷⁶ the flood that killed 500,000 people and caused famine in 1970,⁷⁷ the war in 1971 that produced about 9,000,000 refugees,⁷⁸ and the murder of one of the missionaries, the hospital remained faithful to its mission.⁷⁹

The medical mission became a means to reach the Hindus, Moslems, and Christians of other denominations, whose lifestyles did not include healthful food and drink. In 1975 Dr. Silivio taught people how to use soybeans. He also used soy milk to treat malnourished infants. The local farmers were interested and learned improved planting methods.⁸⁰ The workers of the hospital provided spiritual as well as physical treatment. They preached to the ward patients and their relatives. They also met the clinic patients in the waiting room to show pictures and hold Bible studies.⁸¹ Each patient was told that the hospital was under the guidance of the Divine Healer,⁸² and prayers were offered for those who desired them.⁸³ With the help of local members, the missionary physicians often went out in the evening to the nearby villages with projectors and slides to conduct evangelistic meetings.⁸⁴

The Southern Asia medical work advanced,⁸⁵ as did the Adventist mission in the Furidpur district, because of the influence of the medical mission in Gopalganj.

Official Name:

Gopalganj Seventh-day Adventist Hospital

List of Leaders

Local Evangelists and Nurses *1906-1929); C. F. Shilling – Director of the hospital (1929-1931); H. G. Herbard (1931-1935); Joseph Johannes – Medical Director (1936-1942); S. N. Arinda (1942-1955); Atul Chandra Bol (1948-1984); Marjorie R. Young – Medical Superintendent (1961-1962); Harold Googe (1962-1966); Leon N. Powrie – Nursing Supervisor (1965-1967); Patience F. Noecker (1967-1968); James V. Blaricum – Medical Director (1969-

1971); Francis D. Solivio – Medical Director (1973-1978); Tamara Sleeter (1982-1983); Patience F. Noecker (1984-1985)

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NOTES

1. The mission station was established by the first Brahmin convert, L. G. Mookerjee, the great grandson of William Carey. See G. F. Enoch, "Evangelism at Gopalganj," *Australasian Record*, August 1937, 3.
2. For more details about the story, see Poddar, Srikanto K. & Sircar, Girish Chandra, "The Record of How and When the Early S.D.A Mission Work Stated in East Bengal, Now Bangladesh, India," March 10, 1982, accessed July 2022, from <https://adventistdigitallibrary.org/islandora/object/adl:422456/datastream/OBJ/view>; see also, "A Tract Did It," *North Pacific Union Gleaner*, February 1962, 8; *Pacific Union Recorder*, February 1962, 1.
3. For a more detailed biography of Lal Gopal Mookerjee, see *History of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bangladesh*, 22.
4. Srikanto K. & Sircar, Girish Chandra, *The Record of How and When the Early S.D.A Mission Work Stated in East Bengal, Now Bangladesh*, India, March 1982, 10.
5. *Ibid.*, 10.
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10. C. F. Shilling, "Medical Work in East Bengal," *Eastern Tidings*, October 1927, 3.
11. *History of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bangladesh*, 54; Gil G. Fernandez, *Light Down Over Asia*, 308.
12. See *Southern Asia Tidings* 64:2, February 1969, 3.
13. G. F. Enoch, "Evangelism at Gopalganj," *Australasian Record*, August 1937, 3; R. H. Pierson "India Calls," *Southern Tidings*, June 1937, 8.
14. G. F. Enoch, "Evangelism at Gopalganj," 3.
15. *Ibid.*, 3.
16. W. F. Storz, "The Rains Came Down and the Floods Comes Up so: Give Us Higher Ground – East Pakistan, Build us Stronger Building – Assam," *Southern Asia Tidings*, June 1967, 7.
17. F. H. Loasby, "Doing in the Northeast," *Eastern Tidings*, August 1939, 5.
18. G. F. Enoch, "Evangelism at Gopalganj," 3.
19. *Ibid.*, 3.
20. R. S. Fernando, "A Visit to East Bengal," *Eastern Tidings*, May 1940, 3.
21. Ronald M. Neish, "Adventists Feed House Homeless and Hungry," *Southern Asia Tidings*, 1973, 9. "the foundations for this main building, which had to be very substantial masonry extending several feet below the ground, had to be in and well above water level before the floods came." F. H. Loasby, "Doing in the Northeast," 5.
22. Cecil B. Guild, "East Pakistan Welcomes First GC Officer," *Southern Asia Tidings*, January 1971, 5.
23. R. E. Rice, "By Launch in East Pakistan," *Southern Asia Tidings*, April 1964, 11.
24. *History of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bangladesh*, 54.
25. G. A. Nelson, "Medical Department News," *Eastern Tidings Southern Asia Division*, December 1940, 3.
26. G. G. Lowry, "Gopalganj, East Bengal," *Eastern Tidings Southern Asia Division*, October 1941, 7.
27. G. G. Lowry, "Gopalganj, East Bengal," 7.

28. F. H. Loasby, "The Northeast Under the Present Distress," *Eastern Tidings Southern Asia Division*, August 1942, 4.
29. M. G. Champion, "East Pakistan by Rails and Water" *Youth's Instructor*, December 1952, 19. He was son of early pioneer Purna Chandra Arinda, Chitta Ranjon Bol and Suranjon Sircar.
30. C. R. Bol served from 1933 to 1939 at Jalirpar and from 1939 to 1957 at Gopalganj.
31. Ashish K. Bol, personal knowledge from his father, Atul C. Bol.
32. Surnddra N. Arinda, "Gopalganj and Village Dispensary Work, East Bengal," *Eastern Tidings Southern Asia Division*, November 1942, 3.
33. T. C. Bairagee, "Evangelistic Work in Gopalganj," *Eastern Tidings Southern Asia Division*, January 1941, 6.
34. Ashish K. Bol, personal knowledge.
35. Ashish K. Bol, personal knowledge.
36. Kenneth Brown, "News," *Southern Asia Tidings*, August 1961, 10.
37. Marjorie R. Young, "Gopalganj in Full Operation," *Australasian Record and Advent World Survey*, March 1962, 5.
38. O. W. Lange, "Report from East Pakistan: Gopalganj," *Southern Asia Tidings*, October 1961, 5.
39. Ibid.
40. Marjorie R. Young, "Gopalganj in Full Operation," *Australasian Record and Advent World Survey* 66:11, March 1962, 5.
41. Ibid.
42. See *The Lack Union Herald*, February 1962, 4.
43. *History of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bangladesh*, 54.
44. Ibid.
45. Cecil B. Guild, "Twenty-two are Baptized at Monosapara," *Southern Asia Tidings*, December 1967, 19.
46. *History of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bangladesh*, 54.
47. Ibid.

48. O. W. Lange, "Dr. Lowry Visits Pakistan," *Southern Asia Tidings*, January 1971, 6.
49. Olivier. W. Lange, "Pakistan," *Southern Asia Tidings*, January 1971, 18.
50. Ibid.
51. Lillian Currie "Student Missionaries in Bangladesh" *Gleaner North Pacific Union Conference*, August 1973, 2.
52. D. H. Skau, "Bangladesh Tornado Victims Aided," *Southern Asia Tidings*, June 1977, 7.
53. "10,000 injured and 500,000 homeless persons in Gopalganj. One-third of all the city's concrete buildings and all of the bamboo houses were destroyed by early April tornadoes." "Date Line Data: Washington D.C" *Southern Asia Tidings* 71:5, May 1977, 4.
54. "Madison's Missionaries," *The Madison Survey and Alumni News*, March 1973, 1.
55. *History of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bangladesh*, 54.
56. For more about Francis Daiz Solivio, see Ronald M. Neish, "Adventists Feed House Homeless and Hungry," 9.
57. Ibid.
58. *Southern Asia Tidings*, July 1973, 14.
59. See "Francis D. Solivio," in *Southern Asia Tidings*, July 1973, 14.
60. R. S. Lowry, "Stress and Progress in Troubled Lands," *ARH*, July 15, 1975, 9; Lowry S. Roscoe, "General Conference Session 1975," *Southern Asia Tidings*, July 1975, 6,
61. R. M. Neish, "Bangladesh Section," *Southern Asia Tidings*, January 1974, 12.
62. Dr. Abelardo Osoria earned his medical degree at Southwestern University in the Philippines. Prior to coming to Bangladesh, he served as a resident and staff physician at Manila Sanitarium and Hospital. See Union Reports "Bangladesh," *Southern Asia Tidings*, May 1973, 12.
63. W. H. Mattison, "Bangladesh Villagers Press in for Campmeeting," *Southern Asia Tidings*, March 1975, 3,7.
64. *History of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bangladesh*, 54.
65. "Gopalganj Hospital," *Southern Asia Tidings* 68:10, October 1973, 5-6.
66. *History of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bangladesh*, 54.

67. Gil G. Fernandez, *Light Down Over Asia*, 309.
68. Executive Committee, Action No. 85-29 – closure of Gopalganj SDA Hospital, Bangladesh Union Mission; *History of Seventh-day Adventist Church in Bangladesh*, 55.
69. Ibid.
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71. Kenneth Brown, "News," *Southern Asia Tidings*, August 1961, 10.
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78. Ibid.
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81. T. C. Bairagee, "Evangelistic Work in Gopalganj," 6.
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84. Ibid.

85. For more information about the beginning of Southern Asia medical works and its targets, see Theodore R. Flaiz, "Medical Council Announces Objectives," *Southern Asia Tidings*, February 1969, 10-15.

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