

MISSION FIELD.**Through the Bheel Country.***For the Presbyterian Review.*

Mr Buchanan and I having been appointed by the Mission Council's Committee to visit the whole Bheel country and report on the most desirable location for placing a missionary to work among these aborigines, on Monday the 27th Oct., we left Mhow via Dhar and Sirdarpore for Ali Rajpore.

It having been impossible on account of other business to decide the date for starting until the very day we left our preparations were somewhat hurried. However we did not require much baggage, a small tent, a bed apiece and our clothes and food were all we took. These with three of our Christian preachers we sent on in a bullock cart while we followed in my tonga. The latter is a two wheeled rig peculiar to India built more for strength than beauty, being able to travel over the roughest of roads, and yet give much more speed and comfort than the bullock carts.

The journey to Dhar, 33 miles, was taken at night as the sun is still very hot at this season of the year. After spending the day there looking after the interests of our new mission we pushed on to Sirdarpore 25 miles further on. Here our first duty was to meet the Political Agent, Colonel Gaisford, who is in charge of the whole Bheel country. He received us most kindly and promised to do all he could to help us. He gave us the use of his maps to make out our trip and also wrote to the Dewans or Ministers of the two largest states we passed through to do what they could to help us. The sympathy and assistance of the Political Agent are probably the greatest human help we could receive in settling in such a country for he is practically absolute in his rule. He gave us the further encouraging news that the plans were out for constructing a government road through the heart of the Bheel country, an improvement which as you will see later on will immensely facilitate mission work in this section.

It was Thursday noon before we left Sirdarpore, and good roads, to thread our way among the jungles and hills of Ali Rajpore and Jhabua. This would have been impossible were it not that at each village we received a guide who showed us the way to the next village. Strange to say many of these Bheel guides, who know every foot of the way as far as the neighboring village three or four miles away, could tell us nothing of the road beyond, in many cases had never been beyond.

Being pressed for time, and having good moonlight we decided not to camp at sundown but to press right on down the ghats hoping to reach a large village by about 9 o'clock. But the steep ghat was more than we bargained for. It was difficult enough to get the unloaded tonga down but the loaded bullock cart was too much for the bullocks, stones as big as your head lay in the wheel tracks, while on either side of the narrow road, only wide enough to admit of the cart, were immense boulders or the overhanging hillside. We tied the wheels of the cart and joining forces with the bullocks started to drag the cart down the steep road, but being old and not strong it broke and we were forced to unload and carry part of our load down the hill. It was nearly midnight when finally we halted on the banks of a beautiful clear stream. We were too tired to erect our tent so after getting a cup of tea and something to eat we lay down to a refreshing sleep in the shelter of a large Mowa tree. The next day's journey was a most delightful one. The road though rough led through a beautiful tract of country. We waded through upwards of 15 streams in less than that number of miles, and on the plains between these streams we passed between beautiful fields of maize and jawari, all cultivated by the Bheels whose little grass huts lay scattered about on every hillside. This whole section of country in the direction of Ali Rajpore is very rich and thickly populated with Bheels. That night by a mistake of the guides our cart went on a different road from the tonga and we had to lie down supperless on the ground with, fortunately however, a warm quilt each to wrap around us. Next morning we had an interview with the Raja of a small state named Jobat. He seemed interested to hear our purpose and would I have no doubt be pleased to do something done for the Bheels. Wherever we found opportunity in the villages through which we passed we published the message of Christ and His Salvation. In the towns which are occupied chiefly by Hindus we found ready audiences but the Bheels in this section are somewhat barred from us on account of their language, for they talk a very broken Hindi mixed with some words of their own. A few months practice however would enable a man to understand them pretty well. The Bheels do not live in the towns but in small villages, or in houses separated some distance from one another. Work among them therefore would be largely itinerant preaching to groups of two or three or to larger crowds that gather at their marriages and festivals.

In Ali Rajpore which we reached Saturday evening we received a cordial welcome from the Dewan, the young Raja being away studying in the Raj Kumar College at Indore. We stayed in the Guest House where the Minister and his assistant paid us a long visit giving us much valuable information as to the Bheels, their number, their customs, and our likelihood of success in working among them. It appears that there are four main roads branching from Ali Rajpore on all of which the Bheels are to be numerous found. The soil is good and the country not very hilly so that one could move about pretty freely in the rains. Building can be done cheaply here, wood being plentiful. Fruit is cultivated to great advantage and the richest of crops might be produced if the Bheels were trained to be better farmers. This the state is seeking to do by introducing Hindu cultivators, but I fear it will only tend to Hinduise and create caste distinctions. Ali Rajpore can best be reached not by the route we traversed but from the Ratlam Godra Ry., through Gujerat. It is 40 miles distant on a fair road, which the Dewan tells us is soon to be macadamised.

All along the route we found memories of Mr. Campbell and his men who have been over the district more than once. One of the numerous friends they made was of great use to us. His son, a young Bheel boy who reads and writes very well, escorted us to a Bheel village near the town where we were made very welcome on account of our guide. It was at night that we visited them and the dark faces of our listeners showed up weird and strange in the moonlight; but they listened attentively while we held a short service and we hope that our constant repetition and simple language left something of the message in their minds and hearts. Leaving Ali Rajpore we traversed a beautiful section of country watered by clear fresh streams. On this trip we were again separated from our ox-cart through an error of the guides and not only had to spend the night on the bare ground, but went hungry for a day and in no little anxiety about our lost cart. As we neared Jhabua the country began to get hilly and broken again and the steep rocky approaches to the river near the city were a severe strain to the tonga. In Jhabua we were made thrice welcome. The Dewan himself inspected all arrangements and insisted on our being his guests during our stay, even our mess' food he provided. We explained to him our purpose in visiting the state and he made every arrangement whereby we could see the whole district to best advantage. He introduced us to the young Raja who seemed pleased to meet us and hear of our work. When we left he provided us with a mounted guide who remained with us through the rest of the trip. From the Dewan we learned that the Bheels had been quite subdued but not civilized, though several had been educated and we ourselves saw some of their boys in the schools. We could gather from what he said that until the heart was reached and higher motives implanted the Bheel would remain the wild man of the woods. It would be tedious to the reader to describe the rest of our trip. Under the care of Jhabua's sowar we no more lost our way, though we travelled some roads that made me very much afraid for the horses and tonga.

Jhabua is not as rich a country as Ali Rajpore nor as thickly populated but it presents several advantages as a mission centre. It is healthier being at a higher altitude, and is on the route of the new Government road which when completed will bring the town within 8 miles of the railway at a point some 50 miles east of Ratlam. It was from the next station to this that we finally took train home after visiting Rumbapura and Thandla the residences of the two northern Thesildars of Jhabua state.

Much might be said of what we saw and heard that would prove of great interest but my letter is already too long. Everything points however to the time having fully arrived when this work should be taken up. The country is being opened and roads built, the Agent is friendly as are also the Dewans of both states, who during the minority of their respective Rajas hold the reins of power. Moreover it will not be long before the country is invaded by Hindus—the Bonya money-lender and the Brahmin priest. If we do not take up the work it will be left to the Roman Catholics and what little help can be given by the missionaries in Gujerat. In the two states of Jhabua and Ali Rajpore alone there are over 150 thousand Bheels and not less than 50,000 more in the smaller states. This great people is still un-Hinduised and in their aboriginal simplicity present an abundant opportunity to the Missionary of the Cross. Who is to be the pioneer of our mission in this work we do not know but he will soon be chosen, and I trust the prayers and interest of our Church will follow him to his field of difficult though promising labor.

Yours faithfully

Mhow Nov. 14th 1895.

NORMAN H. RUSSELL.