INTRODUCTION

India is a land of richness and variety. Its panoramic beauty is beyond any comparison and continues to inspire awe and wonder. Its races, languages, religions, cultures, polities, material and spiritual strength, customs and traditions present an endless variety woven into the fabric of a composite and beautiful picture. This guided the destiny of various indigenous cultures and peoples that found a home in Indian subcontinent. The statistics show that there are more than 400 tribes in India. Though they look alike due to many similarities among them, each and every tribe is unique in itself. Among the Indian tribals, the Santals occupy a pre-eminent place. The Santals are the largest of them with a population of about 6.5 millions. They are mostly found in the states of Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha and Assam. There is a significant minority in Bangladesh and a small population in Nepal. The diverse activities the Santals engage in like socio-economic, political, religious and cultural sectors reveal their true identity. Santals express themselves in Santali, which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic linguistic family.

The Santal tribe has a culture with a well defined social system. Originally they were hunters but at present most of them are engaged in agriculture, casual labour and government services. Till the arrival of organised religions in the region, like Hinduism and Christianity, they followed their traditional religion, which believes in Bongas (spirits). Their life cycle is simple with chain of events that are well supported by specific codes and customs.

The term Adivasi is a combination of two Sanskrit words, Adi, meaning ‘first’ or ‘original’ and vasi, meaning ‘dweller’ and so Adivasi, then means the ‘first dwellers’ or ‘first inhabitants’. Adivasis have also been designated as ‘jungli’, persons living in the jungle. Some Hindus in India call them as Vanavasis, ‘the forest dwellers’. The British introduced the term ‘tribal’ and the Indian Constitution included majority of the adivasis as Schuduled Tribes. A ‘tribe’ means a group of people lived at a place time immemorial.
Chotanagpur, a wooded and hilly area is the homeland of over three million tribal people, comprising the three major tribes, the Mundas, the Oraons and the Kharias and some other tribal groups. These tribal groups reside in villages almost exclusively by themselves. These tribals are non-Aryans, and consider themselves to be the original inhabitants of India. This is the reason why they call themselves Adivasis, the sons of the soil. But since about two centuries, the ownership of their lands has been shifted to the invaders of different power and culture, and the tribals are enormously losing their precious land. The Mughals followed by the British paved the way for the emergence of landlords or Zamindars who occupied the landed property of the tribals. After attaining political freedom, the government of India is more interested in the economic welfare of the country by establishing factories in the tribal land and as a result the tribals became alienated from their precious ancestral land and agriculture. The adivasis, the native people became foreigners to their own land.

The loss of their ancestral lands, for the tribals, means not only the loss of their livelihood, but also the disintegration of their whole social culture. They have revolted vigorously for the preservation of their tribal identity. When they were defeated, they turned to religion and magic to be free from their distress and depression. When their gods and spirits disappointed them, they were in search of more powerful gods and the powers of their enemies, the Hindus and the British. They were ready to change their religion and embrace Christianity, if the Christian missionaries were ready to recover their land from the Zamindars. The tribals who were distressed were happy to see the Lutheran missionaries entering the area. These missionaries taught the tribals how to defend their rights against the Zamindars in the courts. These missionaries slowly withdrew themselves from the tribals to avoid any problem with the British administration. The disappointed tribals were ready to join the Catholic missionaries who were ready to fight for their cause.

The motive for their conversion was the recovery of the lost land and freedom from the exploitation by the landlords who had acquired their land and made tenants of former proud land – owners. In this regard, the Belgian Jesuit missionary, Fr. Lievens played an important role by keeping them safe from the evil
influence of the spirits by making them Christians. Another motive for conversion to
the Christian faith was the financial assistance against the money-lenders which the
tribals received from the missionaries. It was Fr. John Hoffmann, another Jesuit
missionary who liberated thousands of tribals from the greedy money-lenders
through his Cooperative Bank. The missionaries built up an impressive educational
system in Chotanagpur which benefited the tribals immensely.

Regarding the missionary work in the Central India, the Canadian Baptists,
the French Capuchins and SVD Fathers made many conversions among the Bhil
tribals. But the rift between the higher and lower class people became a hindrance
the missionary work over there. In the North East India, the Salesians took up the
missionary work among the various tribes through their various institutions which
promote human dignity through Christian values. The Protestants also have done
much evangelical work in that area.

Missionary works started among the Santals who live in the border regions
of Bihar and Bengal with the arrival of the Protestants among them as early as 1860.
The Catholics approached them shortly before the First World War. The Jesuits
from Sicily and Malta and from Chicago-Detroit were the first to pursue this work.
In 1938, the Third Order Franciscans (TOR) came to help the Jesuits in Bhagalpur
area which became the Diocese of Bhagalpur in 1965. The work of the Sicilian and
Maltese Jesuits among the Santals of Santal Parganas gave birth to the Diocese of
Dumka in 1962. The P.I.M.E. Fathers who worked in the Diocese of Krishnagar and
shifted to Dinajpur in 1928, worked among the Santals in the Malda Prefecture. The
Salesians who were in Krishnagar Diocese from 1928 onwards began to work among
the Santals of Murshidabad District in the 1960s. In 1981, they also took up the
Santal apostolate among the Santals Purnea District

These Santals captivated the attention of the European missionaries, who
were looking for a chance to begin a mission among them. The protestant
missionaries had already established some mission stations and they were growing.
Among them, the Catholic Bengal Mission in India with its headquarters in Calcutta
that encompassed a very vast geographical area and probably the largest mission in
the world played a pivotal role in establishing the missionary enterprise among the Santals. In this connection, it should be noted that since 1859, The Catholic Church’s Bengal Mission as well as the ecclesiastical province of the Archdiocese of Calcutta were entrusted to the Society of Jesus.

The West Bengal Mission vis-a-vis the Archdiocese of Calcutta covered most of the present states of West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, a part of Bihar and northern Odisha in 1886. In course of time, the territory came to be divided with new Jesuit Provinces: Ranchi, Madhya Pradesh, Hazaribagh, Jamshedpur, Dumka-Raiganj and Darjeeling and more than 20 dioceses. This expansion was made possible with the steady inflow of Belgian Jesuits, increasing Indian vocations to the Society of Jesus, and later on the Jesuits from Sicily and Malta (from 1924), Yugoslavia (from 1925), Canada (from 1947) and the Maryland Province [USA] (from 1948). They were strengthened by the rising number of diocesan priests and religious priests, brothers and sisters. Yet the pioneering work in all these areas was initiated from Calcutta centre, which often was severely drained of personnel and financial resources that were diverted to the vast Catholic community in Chotanagpur.

The eastern part of the Bengal Mission that corresponds to the civil administrative districts of Purnea and Santal Parganas had only two church buildings and they were constructed by the Capuchins in 1849 and in 1871. The Majority of Christians in Purnea town and district were British and Anglo-Indians. At the turn of the 20th century, Fr. Leopold Knockaert, a Belgian Jesuit, was appointed as the parish priest of Purnea and he served the parish for about two decades. Since he was already used to the mission among the Santals in Odisha he made of his time in Purnea to establish a contact with Santals in the region that makes him as a pioneer missionary among the Santals of Purnea district. Fr. Alphonse Dela Croix, a 59 year old Jesuit priest, joined Fr. L. Knockaert who was then 71 years old.

The first church in Santal Parganas District was built in 1908 at Madhupur near a railway station. This church, which functioned as a mission out-post for Santal mission, served also to care for the pastoral needs of the British and Anglo
Indians who used to work in the railways. Since there was no resident priest there, a Jesuit priest from Asansol used to go there on Sundays and feast days. Apart from the fact that some individual missionaries from the Capuchins, PIME (Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions) Fathers and Jesuits occasionally visited the area, there was no concerted effort and plan to evangelize the Santals who were very much concentrated in this part of the country.

Bengal Mission, which was entrusted to the Jesuits of the Belgian Province to look after the mission activities in the vast areas of West Bengal, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha, were unable to cater to the needs of the Santal Mission. Therefore, in 1923, the Superior General of Jesuits, Fr. Vladimir Ledchowski SJ with the collaboration of Fr. Ferdinand Willaert SJ, the Provincial of the Belgian Jesuit Province, and Fr. Maurice Veys SJ, the Superior of the Bengal Mission, contacted the ever willing Provincial of Sicily, Fr. Liborio Rubino SJ, who had already expressed his ardent desire of taking up a mission territory in future. As per the agreement between Sicilian and Belgian Jesuit Provinces and at the invitation of the Superior General, Fr. Ledochowski SJ, the Jesuits of the Sicilian Province which included the island of Malta and Greece, arrived in Calcutta in 1924.

In 1925, the first mission station was established by the Maltese Jesuit, Fr. Anthony Debono SJ, for the Santals in Majlispur (now in Raiganj Diocese, West Bengal). A robust plan for the process of evangelization of the District of Santal Parganas in the State of Jharkhand, where the huge majority of Santals resided, began in 1930 with the arrival of another Maltese Jesuit, Fr. Benjamin Cauchi SJ. With regular arrival of Jesuits from Malta (and Sicily), many mission stations were opened and schools, hostels and health centres were established for the integral welfare of the Santals. The missionaries also worked relentlessly to liberate the Santals from the clutches of the money lenders which ensured them social and economic freedom for integrated development.

The Santals, who were under the clutches of money-lenders experienced a process of severe identity crisis of alienation from their land, culture and language, found the work of the Jesuit missionaries liberating and life-giving. It is no wonder
that by their missionary dedication and service, the Maltese Jesuits have contributed extremely well in the socio-economic, religious, academic, cultural and political spheres focusing on the integral development of the Santals. A steady growth in the lifestyle of Santals would indicate that their social transformation is greatly indebted to the sweat and blood, nay sacrifice of the Maltese Jesuits who never hesitated to plant the seed of Christian charity in the life of simple and industrious people. It should be placed on record for the credit of Maltese missionaries that the creation of two dioceses, namely Dumka diocese in the year 1962, and Raiganj diocese in the year 1978, by bifurcating it from the former, is the fruits of their selfless labour to a large extent.

**The Objectives of the study**

a) To trace the history of the Society of Jesus and its mission in India and West Bengal.

b) To record the social, economic, political, cultural and religious profile of the Santals.

c) To identify the role of the Maltese Jesuits in the expansion of the Santal Mission.

d) To review the contribution of the Maltese Jesuits in promotion of the development of the Santals.

e) To analyze the Maltese Jesuits’ work and the response of the Santals to it.

**Hypothesis**

The Santals experienced an identity crisis of alienation from their land, language and culture. The work of the Maltese Jesuit missionaries empowered them to affirm their legitimate place in a pluralistic Indian society and contributed to re-appropriate and revitalise their self-dignity as an ethno-linguistic tribal community.
Methodology

The methodology applied in this research is mainly descriptive and analytical. Primary sources collected are critically analyzed for this study along with the indigenous sources.

Scope of the Study

J. Troisi¹ in his work, *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices among the Santals* deals with the religious beliefs, rituals and practices of the Santals of Santal Parganas. Though this study is based on Pangro, a Santal village in Santal Parganas, the author’s approach to the subject is common to all the Santals. The author speaks of the Catholic missionaries who have been trying to incarnate the Christian message into Santal milieu by blending the Santal customs with Christian liturgical rites.


*The Santals: Anthropological – Theological Reflections on Santali and Biblical Traditions*, of Timotheas Hembrom, speaks of the comparison between the Biblical and the Santal creation narratives to find out whether the people of these two traditions theologically share the same religious belief. The author appreciates the adaptability of the Catholic missionaries, respect for the Santal cultural customs and traditions and sound moral teaching in their evangelical work.

The study of V. Manuel Raj⁴, *A Santal Theology of Liberation*, (New Delhi, 1990), proposes a theology of liberation based on Indian theology and the ethnography, culture and religion of the Santals.
Selva J. Raj⁵, in his edited book, *Popular Christianity in India: Riting between the lines*, speaks of the Santal popular religious life represented in its ceremonies, rituals, festivals and religious practices. Taking the funerary tradition as a sample, the author examines the patterns of popular acculturation in Santal Catholicism and the Church hierarchy’s response to it, and proposes a model for dialogue.

**Unpublished Theses**


The doctoral thesis of Kariapuram, Mathew George,⁷ *The Impact of Salesian Education on the Santals in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal*, (2001) submitted from the Department of Christian Studies in the University of Madras, speaks of the Salesian educational ventures and their impact on the Santals of Murshidabad district, West Bengal.

Jose Vadapuram’s Ph.D thesis on *Towards a Local Church: Attempts at a New Way of Inculturated Evangelization among the Santals of Jharkhand and West Bengal⁸* deals with the contextual theology, proposes an integral vision at the service of the oppressed Santals.

These research works, both published and unpublished, are either sociological or theological in nature and are geographically limited to certain areas. They are not historical studies. There are many books on Santals and their culture. But the Catholic missionary work among the Santals is rarely recorded in the doctoral research level. The present study is on the missionary work of the Maltese Jesuits among the Santals from 1925 to 1989 in historical perspective and so it is an original study based on the archival sources.
The Sources of Study

The study is depended largely on the archival sources. Primary and secondary sources essential for this research have been collected from archives and libraries in India and abroad. The most important archives and libraries the scholar has consulted for the present work are: The Archivium Romanum Societatis Iesu (The Archives of the Jesuit Curia in Rome), Goethals Research Library, Kolkata, The National Library, Kolkata, Jesuit Provincialate Archives both in Dumka and Kolkata, Various Parish Records and Diocesan archives of Dumka and Raiganj Dioceses, the libraries of St. Albert’s College, Ranchi, Serampore College, Serampore, Khristo Jyoti Mohavidyaloyo, Sambalpur, Morning Star College, Barrackpore, The Asiatic Society, Kolkata, and personal collections of letters, obituaries, souvenirs, statistics, photographs, etc. of some Maltese and Indian Jesuits. However the researcher has gone through the available secondary sources to strengthen the paper.

Primary Sources

The important primary sources consulted are: The Catalogues of Belgian Jesuit Mission of Bengal which includes the Santal Mission of the Maltese Jesuits. “Ai Nostri Amici” (To our Friends) (1930 – 1939) – A monthly publication of the Sicilian Jesuit Province in Italian dedicated to the friends and benefactors of the Province. “Ai Nostri Amici Diario 1938” (To our Friends Diary of 1938). Here the missionaries describe the situation vividly and narrate how various centres were started and developed. They provide a lot of information regarding the life of the Santals, i.e., their culture, economic backwardness, etc. The newsletters referred are: Our Field – The official News letter of the Bengal Mission, Santaliland (1947-1966): Family Letters of the Maltese Jesuits of the Santal Region (Northern India), Ripples over the Ganges (1966-1977): Family Letters of the Jesuits working in Santal Parganas, Purnea, Malda and West Dinajpur Districts, “Boge Juda” (Our News) [1957-1972]: Newsletter of the Santal Region, Santal Region Newsletters (1972-1989) and Dumka-Raiganj Jesuit Province Newsletters (1989 to the present), Historia Domus (Litterae Annuae) are the annual letters sent by the superior of the
community to General Superior and Provincial Superior and Reports of the missionary meetings of the missionaries involved in Santal Mission.

Secondary Sources

Chapterization of the Study

The present study has five chapters in addition to the Introduction and Conclusion. The introduction provides with an elaborate conceptual framework, scope of the study, objectives of the study, survey of literature, limitations of the study, sources of study and methodology of the research. The conclusion brings forth a critical analysis of the works carried over by the Maltese Jesuits for the Christianization and empowerment of the Santals and the response of the Santals towards the mission of the Maltese Jesuits.

The first chapter entitled The Jesuits in General portrays a brief history of the Society of Jesus, the conversion and vision of Ignatius of Loyola, foundation of the Society of Jesus with the specific Formula of Institute, its approval and the Pope’s confirmation, its composition and administration with definite features, its missionary approach. Further its extension to serve the communities in the world through various types of ministries based on the fourth vow of obedience to the Pope, its role in the Counter Reformation, suppression and restoration and commitment to the promotion of faith and justice through its educational institutions. The Jesuits in India includes the arrival and missionary works of Francis Xavier, the other European Jesuit missionaries and their contribution to the Indian linguistics and socio-cultural-religious and educational development. The Jesuits in Bengal includes the role of the Portuguese in the history and establishment of Catholic Church in Bengal, the growth of Bengal Mission under the Belgian Jesuits, service to education, missionary ventures in different sectors of Bengal society, the missionary developments expansion of the Catholic Church and the patronage of Jesuit Bishops in Bengal.
Chapter two focuses on A Socio – Cultural Perspective of Santals. The history and identity of the Santals involves their nomadic movements and settlement in Damin-i-koh in Santal Parganas. The Santals’ ethnic uniqueness is seen through their specific ‘Santali’ language, their characteristics, their natural habitat and their community spirit which makes them belong to one another and feel secure in the rural set up. Their life-style is filled with joy due to numerous festivities and continuous celebrations and their annual and communitarian festivals are essentially connected with the various movements of agriculture, their main occupation. Their strict moral system governed and maintained by the Elders give value to the behaviour of the individuals in the family and village and their patriarchal society treats women with inequality. Their sense of freedom and emergence of native leadership in popular revolt against the British imperialism and the oppressive Zamindari system and their unceasing thirst for a land of their own is expressed in the Santal Rebellion (1855-57). The Santal society divided into different clans with clan based functions, rites and ceremonies performed in the community with their traditional music and dance. Their illiteracy in the educational sector causes them social and cultural alienation. Despite their knowledge of natural and herbal medicines, their superstitious beliefs and their lack of openness to the modern medical facilities led to health hazards in their life. The introduction of currency economy by Zamindars and money lenders pushed their rural and agriculture economy to decline and made them economically poor and dependent. Their monotheistic religion is based on belief in spirits. On the other hand in the name of spirits their valuable time and resources get exploited due to their strong inclination towards the exploitative forces such as, Ojhaism, witch-craft. The Santal three tier Panchayat administrative system is disturbed by the interference of the government and the inroads of the divisive political parties hindered their socio political identity.

The Establishment and Expansion of Santal Mission, the third chapter, speaks of the various exploratory attempts made by the Jesuits of Bengal Mission to establish a Mission among the Santals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The pioneering mission of Fr. Leopold Knockaert among the Santals in Purnea area was replaced and complimented by Fr. Alphonse De La Croix who worked among the
Santals of Santal Parganas and Purnea and patronized the Santal Catholics baptized by Fr. J. B. Anselmo of foreign Mission of Milan. The intervention of the Sicilian Province which included Malta and Greece, paved the way for the Sicilian and Maltese Jesuits to have a permanent footing in Santal Mission. Fr. Anthony Debono, the Maltese pioneer missionary of the Santal Mission among the Maltese Jesuits, settled at Majlispur in 1925 and developed it into a full-fledged Mission Station. Fr. Benjamin Cauchi with his bitter encounters along with his companions since 1930 in Damin-i-koh established some mission stations in Santal Parganas. With the flow of Maltese Jesuits the Santal mission gradually expanded with some more mission stations and when it became a region in 1956 its growth is seen in the emergence of many mission stations and institutions with the collaboration of the different religious congregations. The establishment of the Diocese of Dumka in 1962 and the creation of the Diocese of Raiganj in 1978 are the outcome of the Maltese Jesuit mission. The Santal Region turned to be a full-fledged Dumka – Raiganj Province in 1989 with the first Indian tribal Provincial.

The fourth chapter, Promotion of Socio – Economic Development of Santals deals with the socio – economic disparities between the Santals and the Zamindars and the role Fr. Anthony Debono. He took the option for the Santals and encountered the Zamindars, worked for justice to the oppressed and to redeem their mortgaged lands. The welfare projects of the Maltese Jesuits to promote the socio – economic condition of the Santals, such as the establishment of Rice Banks in the mission stations to serve the poor Santal farmers, famine relief services since 1966, digging drinking water wells to provide drinking water in the villages and the credit cooperation bank to help the agricultural labourers to redeem the mortgaged lands. Fr. Anthony Murmu started the ‘Self – help Movement’, ‘Santal Markets’ and ‘Santal Upliftment Centres’ so to help each other with their own local resources. The Food for work projects and Child Feeding Programme were of great help to the suffering Santals in times of famine, drought and failure of good harvest. Fr. Anthony Savona brought in the Saving Scheme to promote thrift among the Santals. Starting of primary schools and hostels for Santal children in the parishes, scholarships for poor students, High Schools both in vernaculars and English
mediums, High Schools run by the Religious Sisters for girls and introduction of Crafts in the academic curriculum were some of the academic endeavours by the Maltese Jesuits to raise the standard of the Santals. Through the Leadership, Study and Social Work Camps of Learning – Training – Service (LTS) for high School boys, Leadership Camp for Santal College students, Vocational Guidance programme for Santal girl students, Educational Fund to help poor meritorious students and training young Santal boys in carpentry and Welding with the Government Scheme, ‘Training Rural Youth Self – Employment (TRYSEM)’, the Maltese Jesuits empowered the Santal youth. They had also established dispensaries and hospitals in the mission stations. The Outreach programmes include the missionary work among the Barois, Pulis and Paharias, the Jesuit Relief work to the Bangladesh refugees.

The final chapter The Maltese Contribution to Language, Culture and Religion brings out the establishment of a Printing Press, namely, Vinay Press and the promotion of Catholic literature in Santali. Fr. George Muscat initiated many missionaries to Santali language by his methodical Santali Course with his Grammar book and other spiritual and secular literary works. The literary contributions of Fr. J. Portelli and Fr. J.B. Panepinto add much to Catholic literature in Santali. Many Catechetical, Liturgical and Spirituality books also were published and made available in Santali Book Depot in Torai. The systematic and comprehensive revelation of Santal life with its culture and religion is presented in the works of Joseph Troisi. They also organised Cultural Orientation Seminars, the Inter-School Cultural festival and the Leadership Camps for Santal Catholic students. The Maltese Jesuits made efforts to incarnate the Christian faith into the Santal milieu by blending the Santal customs and traditions with the Catholic liturgical rites, the attempts to integrate the traditional Santal festivals into the annual liturgical festivities of the Catholic Church. The singing of the Biblical episodes and Santal history by Sri Francis Hopna Hembrom, in the form of ‘kobi-gan’ (ballads) in Santali during the festivities under the patronage of the Maltese Jesuits reveal the spirit of adaptation and inculturation. The work of Fr. J. M. Gauci Sacco and Fr. Micallef and their joint venture, ‘Sademarsal’ the Communication Centre, the efforts
of Bro. Peter Marandi in Santali liturgical music play an apt role in Mass media. The chapter also discusses the Faith Formation to Santals include the role of the Catechists’ Training Centre in the formation of catechists, Catechism classes in the schools and mission stations, the annual regional inter-school catechism contests, Marriage preparation courses, Vocation Camps, Ecumenical worship with the protestants, Fostering Marian devotion and ‘Katic’Preritko’(Eucharistic Crusaders) for Santal Catholic children.

**Endnotes**


