CHAPTER 4
THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AND SANTHALS

The primary motive of British when they came to India was trade and they never forgot it even when they captured political power. Earlier they were not interested in interfering in religious and social practices of the Indians. However, in due course they were against interference in religious and social life of Indians. Among the Europeans, only the Portuguese exhibited zeal for conversion of India to Christianity. They resorted not only to propaganda and marriages with Indian women but also to converting them forcefully. However, their efforts failed miserably. Besides, their efforts also displeased the natives. The British therefore knew it beforehand. Therefore, they concentrated more in fulfilling their economic and political gains. The company did not permit the British missionaries to enter its territories during the eighteenth century. The conditions, however, changed later on. By the first decade of the 19th century, the British power was firmly entrenched in India and there remained no fear that any native power would be able to challenge them successfully. In 1813, when the Charter of the Company was renewed they succumbed to the pressure of the Evangelists and permitted the Christian missionaries to enter India. The Charter declared that “all those persons who wish to propagate useful knowledge, truth, religion and sound morality among the Indians could go to India and even settle themselves there”. It was also decided by the Charter that the Company would spend rupees one lakh annually for the education of the Indians. Since then the Christian Missionaries started coming to India. India provided them a vast field for achieving their objectives. They believed
that imparting of enlightened and correct education and service to the mankind could be best achieved by converting the heathens and people of other faiths to Christianity which was the professed aim of the Christian Missionaries all over the world. Due to the pressure exerted, it was decided by the Charter Act of 1813 that no permission was necessary for any missionary or any other Englishman to visit and settle down himself in India. From then on the missionaries poured into India in great numbers.

The missionaries adopted every possible means to convert the Indians to Christianity in as large numbers as possible. Opening of missionary schools; both for boys and girls, providing education through English medium, engaging themselves in philanthropic activities of varied type such as establishing hospitals, caring of the sick, the poor and the diseased afflicted with leprosy, helping the needy people in times of famines and floods, attacking the social abuses and religious practices of Indians, offering temptations of money, service and pardon to the culprits, establishing churches etc. were resorted to for luring converts to Christianity by them. Initially, the Indian government was reluctant to provide help to the missionaries in their activities, but, gradually it started supporting them though without declaring it openly. All British officials revered the missionaries, gave due recognition to their activities and supported them in every possible way they could.

The advent of Christianity in Santhal Parganas area opened up new vistas of opportunities to the tribals. The Christian missionaries were the pioneers in spreading education, medical care and social welfare among the tribal, thus, giving them new opportunities for economic improvement and freedom. Christianity was also instrumental in rousing the tribals' political consciousness. Many of the tribal leaders received
their education in Christian schools and some were even sent abroad for further training.

The first Christian missions came to Santhal Parganas not long after their counterparts in Ranchi (1854). One of the two main missions was the Church Missionary society; an Anglican organisation that began its work in 1862 and was especially active in northern Santhal Parganas. The other major mission was the Indian Home Mission. This comprised mostly of Scandinavian missionaries, was inter denominational (predominantly Lutheran) and was based in the South Western portion of the districts between Dumka and Birbhum – Santhal Parganas border. The Indian Home Mission entered the district in 1867 but grew more rapidly than the Anglican Mission.\(^2\)

The main objective of the missionaries who came to the Santhal Parganas no doubt was evangelizing though they addressed the land question too. It is not clear as to what extent missionaries helped the individual Santhals overcome their agrarian distress. We know that L.O. Skrefsrud of the Indian Home Mission was very active in providing agrarian aid such as loans to hard-pressed Santhals.\(^3\) The mission provided the Santhals with other types of the economic aid too, such as famine relief. In addition, the missions were very active in education, medical care and moral reform.

As far as the land rights of the Santhals as a group is concerned, the missionaries thought an orderly protest to be justified if it was necessary as a form of protest as is evidenced in 1871, when the Indian Home Mission restrained the Santhals from engaging in any unorganized form of land protest. However, the Indian Home Mission gave informal
political support to the Santhals in their struggle against dikus, such as contacts with senior officials in Calcutta.

The mission approved of the non-regulation system of administration albeit without great enthusiasm. Missionaries had close relations with the senior officials. For example, Skrefsrud often acted as an unofficial government magistrate and advisor and on one occasion he took some Santhal chiefs to see the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal regarding Santhal policy.

The mission contributed in the areas of medical care, education and moral reforms. The Indian Home Mission, however, was rather different from the other missions in the district as it virtually ran no village schools. On the other hand, it consciously sought to preserve certain Santhal customs and institutions while combating others they thought regressive. The Indian Home Mission tried to keep up meetings that traditionally followed the Santhals annual hunt but attacked alcoholism with exceptional vigour. Skrefsrud held strong pressure on the government to take steps against drunkenness, and induced Santhal village chiefs near his headquarters to petition the government to close the local liquor shops. He sometimes took matters into his own hands. His biographer Olav Hodne wrote “once when (Skrefsrud) passed by a liquor shop, he found one of his Santhal Christian half-drunk outside the shop”, then and there he said “I gave him a most merciless thrashing before all the heathens and it has done him a world of good.”

The missions in Santhal Parganas advocated emigration as a solution of the Santhal problems. To promote emigration, and to encourage a strong Christian presence among the emigrants, both the Indian Home Mission
and Anglican Mission opened their own settlements for their members in the tea plantations.°

The Indian Home Mission and other missions took a strong stand against the Santhal religious activities. Missionaries like Skrefsrud felt that the religious movements posed a serious threat to their missions and dubbed them as not agrarian but as a “rabid, socialistic, political agitation, the regulation being only a means towards an end." Skrefsrud took great pains to explain his views of the Santhal risings to the government, the press and Santhal gatherings.°

The missionaries in Santhal Parganas as elsewhere were ideologically closer to the government and perhaps had better contacts with the high officials as mentioned earlier also. The various missions in the country as well as the Santhal Parganas district had the avowed goal of converting the entire countryman to Christianity. One of the examples was a letter written and widely distributed by Mr. Edmond; “It conveyed the idea that as all India obeyed one government, as all parts of the country kept up constant communication with one another by means of electric, telegraph and as the Railway systems united the different extremes of this great Peninsula, it was necessary that there should be one religion also, and proper, therefore, that everyone should embrace Christianity.”

Such letters and other like materials, pointing out the necessity and usefulness of conversions to Christianity were addressed not only to the public, but more so to those who held responsible positions in the service

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of state with a view to get their support in the activities of the missionaries.

The missionaries drew large converts from tribals and optimized this opportunity in times of famines and floods. Money, service, temptations of jobs and better status in society were offered by the missionaries to the tribals for achieving their object. Sometimes they resorted to forceful conversions as well. They gave their messages to the people sometimes even within the premises of temples and mosques, and, as they were accompanied by a constable or a government chaprasi (peon), nobody dared to check them.

In 1830 and 1850 respectively, two laws were passed by the government that removed disabilities arising out of change of religion of an individual. It was also decided by that time that Christian converts shall not be deprived of the right to inherit property of their father whether a Hindu or a Muslim. These laws also helped the missionaries in obtaining conversions.

Thus, the Christian missionaries used all sorts of means to get large conversions among the Indians. They remained very active in the first half of the 19th century. However, they became cautious as a result of 1857-58 which came as a jolt to their activities.

About twenty missionaries were at work in the Santhal Parganas. The Anglican Mission had one missionary per 500 Christians but this ratio declined over time and the Indian Home Mission had between one per thousand and one per thousand and five hundred during later years. Both Missions had one Santhal worker per 20-30 Christians. The missions tried with varying extents to graft church government on traditional tribal institutions. All the missions appointed tribals to positions of authority in the church, such as pastors, teachers, lay elders and catechists. Most of
these church officials were given formal training at seminars and elsewhere. Many of them were already traditional tribal officials. Missionaries, Santhal aides and ordinary parishioners held periodic meetings, which usually served more as channels of communication than as forums of decision making. Small contributions in cash or kind were usually expected from parishioners as help for the upkeep of church buildings and other expenses. But tribal churches were not self-supporting.

In Santhal Parganas the relation between various missions were more harmonious. The Anglican Mission and the Indian Home Mission had separate areas of operation by mutual agreement. A smaller mission in Santhal Parganas was founded by Mr. Haegert who broke away from the Indian Home Mission and in no time became very popular in the region. The Christianity left indelible impact on the Santhals of Santhal Parganas district. A number of missionary schools were opened and converted Christian Santhals were indoctrinated there. Many of the Santhal leaders had their first education in these institutions. Many of the Kherwar leaders including Bhagirath Manjhi were thought either to have been a lapsed Christian or to have attended a missionary school. Many Babajis were said to have had some contact with Christianity. Their proximity and contacts with Christianity help to explain why Kherwar devotees adopted new Christian beliefs and practices.

A large number of hospitals and other voluntary institutions were established in the Santhal Parganas district by the missionaries and the converted Santhal Christians availed the facilities offered by various missions very generously. The Christian Santhals were provided with
some monetary help during the period of scarcity and natural calamities. Thus the converted Santhals constituted a privileged class among the Santhals who started despising their own aboriginal brethren. Relations between Christians and non-Christian Santhals were not good. To be sure, they did sometimes eat together, and it is likely that they lived in the same villages to a greater extent than the Mundas and Oraons. On the other hand there were little intermarriages between Christians and non-

When some influential Santhals were converted by the Indian Home Mission in 1872, few Santhal headmen objected and decided to “outcaste” the converts and drive the missionaries away. But the outcome was not what headmen intended. The account of Mr. Hodne; Skrefsrud’s biographer is worth quoting at length since it illustrates the missions’ politics towards Santhal traditions:

The day this should take place, however, the Magistrate arrived and arrested Matru Paranganait (a village circle headman, the leader of the opposition to the mission) on charges brought against him for earlier offences. This happening had a great effect on the non-Christian community. Matru returned from the jail eight months later in broken health. He was carried from place to place seeking different Santhal medicine men in order to get his health restored, but no one could help him. Finally, he was brought back to his home at Benegaria (The Indian Home Mission’s headquarter), only to await death. Then Skrefsrud went
to him. He spoke to him plainly about his sins and the Lord’s way of salvation. Thereupon, he prayed that God would forgive Matru and restore his health. Having done this he gave him some medicine and left him. Shortly afterwards Matru became well, then his attitudes towards the missionaries and the Christians changed completely and later … he was baptised. Sometimes afterwards his younger brother… (A village headman) was also baptised…. Biram (Skrefsrud’s Santhal teacher) says that the events of the baptism of Benegaria’s top (Santhal) ruler…. And the conversion of his brother… ushered a new phase in Christian leadership and the reputation of the Christians in the Santhal society.

This was in 1873. Soon afterwards, three hundred Santhal headmen met at Skrefsrud’s invitation and agreed that no Christian Santhal should lose any of his rights on account of his religion. Nonetheless, as late as 1885-86 it was reported that the Anglican Santhals were denied the services of the village barbers and of salt and oil sellers.13 Apparently, many Santhals feared that Christianity posed a threat to tribal solidarity. In 1875 members of the Anglican Mission reported that “thousands” of Santhals would become Christians. Naturally they felt the threat of their extinction. Many of them turned to Hinduism and most of the Santhals wished to cling to their age-old traditional religion. They called themselves Kherwars and opposed Christianity tooth and nail. Both Kherwarism and Christianity claimed to be the true Santhal religion
and took that claim seriously. The Christian missions, by promoting moral reforms like reduction in alcoholism and sexual promiscuity had ignited the sense of enlightenment among Santhals and Christian Santhals in turn had become somewhat richer than non-Christian Santhals. They became better educated and consequently were more often employed in white-collared jobs. Another reason for Christian’s comparative affluence was that many Christians spent less on alcohol and traditional ceremonies. Despite the missionaries’ support for tribal emigration, Christians seem to have emigrated less than non-Christians from Santhal Parganas. Many missionaries were shocked at diku’s exploitation of the Santhals and missions were in a good position to help the latter, thanks to their close relationship with government officials. Often they took the impoverished Santhal peasants with them to the government officials and sought redressal of their agrarian problems and earned latter’s appreciation. Nevertheless, the mission activities in Santhal Parganas aggravated the problem of internal tribal solidarity that gave birth to the Kherwar movement among the Santhals.

The Santhals had practiced animism. Animism is exceedingly crude form of a religion in which magic is the predominant element. It conceives of man as passing through a life surrounded by a ghostly company of power, elements mostly impersonal in character, shapeless phantoms of which no image can be formed. Some of these are taken to be presiding over particular department of life or sphere of influence. The Santhals believed in the presence of the souls of their own dead whom they worshiped at Mayhiyen then. The Malers had a strong belief in the supernatural beings; the Gosain. The Maler children were instructed
about the Gosain from the very beginning. The term Gosain was a household word and was used to denote a group of spirits that were believed to guide their destiny. Worship of nature was another form of belief which prevailed among the Santhals and other tribes of the Santhal Parganas. Sun, Moon and Earth were considered the creator or supreme power. The Santhals identified the Sun as Sing Bonga, i.e. the Supreme God. The Santhals equated Dharmesh, the Supreme deity with the Sun and regarded it as husband of Dharti Mata; the Mother Earth. The activities of ancestors were quite evident for the Santhal and ancestor worship found an important place in their religious beliefs. They recognised that man’s power was restricted and that he had access to limited areas, but, through ancestor worship this power could be increased and the areas expanded. They believed in the existence of ancestors and their interest and intervention in the worldly affairs. They were at work in their real life. The Santhals believed in various types of spirits like protective spirits, benevolent spirits, evil or malevolent spirits and ancestral spirits. Among the protective spirits Marang Buru; literally the mountain spirits figured prominently in Santhal myths. He shared the fortunes of the village and was invoked on all ceremonial occasions. Jaher Burhi was shadow deity who received offerings together with Marang Buru. The major spirits of the Santhals were benevolent. They believed that they were present everywhere in the shape of armed or tree or store or stream or mountain etc. Bhut Pisach deities of diseases like small pox, fever, abortion etc. were considered evil spirits. The cause of death was considered to be the bad effect of the evil spirits. The spirit of graveyard or the spirit of residing in a lonely place in a deep forest was also
considered to be malevolent. Children and expectant mothers were forbidden to visit such lonely places. The strong belief in the departed ancestors as spirits clearly showed their close affinity.

The Santhals, in fact, fashioned their religion after Hinduism. They had over them a great impact of Vaishnavism. There were many similarities between their own beliefs and the Hindu religious beliefs. They also worshipped Mahadeva (Shiva), Ram and Krishna in their own ways. They believed in Goddess worship and worshipped Durga, Kali, Parvati and Sita in their own pantheons. The Hindu saints also influenced them and impressed upon them to thwart the evil designs of the Christian missions to convert them into their own religion.

The Christian missionaries did not wish that any movement among the Santhals cropped up against the missionaries or the government officials. Nevertheless, the Santhals gave vent to their grievances and in turn Kherwar and other movements started among them. There is no evidence that the Christian Santhals were active in the agrarian, religious and political movements of the Santhals. This was not surprising in view of the hostility between the Kherwars and the Christian Santhals.

There is no doubt that the Christian missionaries in the Santhal Parganas district did a commendable work and helped the growth of social and political consciousness among the Santhals. The impact of Hinduism also induced them to take cudgel against their exploiters.
REFERENCES:

5. Ibid, pp. 165-8, 281-7
8. Ibid.
15. Ibid.