



ROLE OF MISSIONARIES IN SOCIAL CHANGE OF ORISSA

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Abstract: *Orissa, popularly known as the sacred land of Lord Jagannath, is a land of resplendent glory and rich cultural heritage. In spite of such glorious history, there were number of evil systems spreading the firmament of this sacrosanct land. These were illiteracy, idolatry, superstition, self - immolation under the chariot of Lord Jagannath in Puri, rigid caste system, untouchability, sati system, meriah sacrifice and infanticide etc. However with the advent of the missionaries in this land, there was a tremendous transformation in the social sphere particularly in the tribal society of Orissa. They constantly persuaded and pressurized the Government to abolish such evil systems from the society and later on it was legalized. The missionaries were also the pioneer of female education and the first people to come in close contact with the tribal communities who were isolated from the mainstream since time immemorial. As a result of this social mobilization took place and a favourable ambience was created. It helped in the regeneration and renovation of traditional society into a pragmatic one.*

Keywords: *Illiteracy, superstition, caste system, meriah sacrifice, sati system, infanticide*

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1. INTRODUCTION:

Orissa, popularly known as the sacred land of Lord Jagannath, is a land of resplendent glory and rich cultural heritage. It is situated on the eastern coast of India and has been a link between the North and the South. Its history dates back to the age of antiquity and has borne names like Kalinga, Utkal and Odra¹ (Orissa: 2009).

In spite of such glorious history, there were number of evil systems shrouding the firmament of this sacrosanct land. These were illiteracy, idolatry, superstition, self-immolation under the chariot of Lord Jagannath in Puri, rigid caste system, untouchability, sati system, meriah sacrifice and infanticide etc.

With the coming of the Christian missionaries to this land, there was a tremendous makeover of social sphere in Orissa particularly in tribal communities. To regenerate and renovate the traditional society in to an upgraded stature, they had brought a handful of social welfare schemes. First of all, they uprooted the old customs, rites, rituals, superstitions etc and in place of that, they keened to implant social virtues like casteless society, chastity, charity, fraternity and monotheism etc. They propounded the noble concept of fatherhood of God and brotherhood of mankind.

They also targeted the most inhuman or evil practices such as sati system, infanticide and meriah sacrifice. The East India Company (government) also decided to develop general toleration for all religious sects² (Kaye: 367). In outset, the company authorities thought that the missionaries might disturb the religious equilibrium of India and thereby threaten the social order with their egalitarian notions. The company also believed the ideas of social revolution of missionaries might lead to chaos and finally to the end of the British rule. So, Lord Wellesley, instructed the British officials to adopt a policy of non-interference in socio - religious matter³ (EIM: 1858). Thus, the British authorities allowed the people to perform exercise their religious rites and ceremonies at their own will (Ray: 98).

Certainly it was political expediency which worked behind the execution of the policy of non - interference in socio - religious institutions of Orissa. However, the Christian missionaries had secured license from the British authorities for the first time in 1813 to work in India⁵ (Watson: 137) and in 1822 Orissa was selected as the site for missionary operations. Thereafter, they heralded a new epoch in the social field of Orissa.



2. OBJECTIVE OF MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES:

Preaching, teaching and distribution of sacred literature was their prime objective. Propagation and popularization of Gospel of Jesus Christ and virtues of Christianity among the heathen was also their hidden objective.

After a minute observation on Orissan socio - religious aspects, they decided to knock down the age old faith in the established institutions. Therefore, they sought to 'get into the people' to reach their feelings, to get hold of what they believed in and then to blow up their hope and confidence in traditional socio - religious institutions and thereby made them feel that 'they had nothing left to stand upon' and side by side new values were infused in Christianity. They propounded that Christianity was not merely a new creed but a way of life, a means of changing the customary outlook of the people. To bring social transmutation of Orissan society, the missionaries adopted some bold steps. These were:

3. PREACHING OF CHRISTIANITY IN LOCAL LANGUAGE - A BOON FOR THE MASS

The missionaries learned Oriya language, the language of the mass and preached their gospel through it. They had also studied the local history and mythology and the use of local anecdote and gave their addresses the desired appeal⁶ (Sutton: 1833). Therefore, people could easily follow the principles of Christianity and accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Thereafter, people could understand the concept of monotheism, brotherhood of mankind and fatherhood of God and were very much attracted the virtues of Christianity like love, affection, charity and honesty.

4. MISSIONARIES AND THEIR ROLE IN BUILDING THE CHARACTER OF NATIVE CHRISTIANS:

The missionaries gave great emphasis on the development of the character of the Oriya Christians. Therefore, they inculcated in them virtues like honesty, benevolence, decency, regard for truth and chastity. Their intention was to make the people role models for the present and future generations. The missionaries also emphasized to preach them the spirit of mutual help to promote community life. As a result of this, the spirit of community life was fostered in Orissa⁷ (op.cit:351). Even the poorest Oriya Christian contributed according to his capacity to keep Christian schools and orphanages going. Marriage funds were raised



and houses were also built for the accommodation of newly married couples⁸ (Hunter: 1872). Besides that, the converts enjoyed economic backing from the missionaries. The missionaries were also protected them from oppressive Zamindars and moneylenders. As the converts learnt English and were acquainted with local Government officers, they got some advantages regarding employment.

Apart from that, the missionaries established separate Christian colonies for converts in plots of land where Christian colonies developed with the houses of uniform pattern, clean streets and well managed schools. Thus, the spirit of corporate living and mutual collaboration was reinforced⁹ (Peggs: 1846). These colonies might have served dual purpose. The converts could be kept under the watchful eyes of the missionaries and secondly the flourishing Christian colonies with contented looking men in them to be expected to appear to other communities in the area as a tangible evidence of the merit of the new faith.

Besides that, the missionaries gave much emphasis on amending the outlook of the converts in various ways. They discouraged tattooing their arms and faces, reduced their habits of drinking, forbade traditional worship and persuaded to follow the principles of Christianity in worshipping Christ. Some of the rescued meriahs also played an important role in changing the outlook of the Khonds. This helped to develop strong community feeling and exclusiveness which impaired their effectiveness as an agency of social change.

5. MISSIONARIES : THE PIONEER OF CO - EDUCATION IN ORISSA

The missionaries realized that without providing education, their message of God could not reach to the people. Therefore, they introduced education in Orissa. Between June 1822 and December 1823, fifteen schools were established for both the boys and the girls. The aim of missionary education was both moral enlightenment and economic security¹⁰ (Ibid: 249). Missionary schools were not opened not only to Christians but also to all people irrespective of caste and creed. Spread of female education was the outstanding effort undertaken by the missionaries.

Girls including non - Christians and even of tribal families were provided education. The missionary educational endeavour had one more social result i.e. replacement of village teachers by outsiders with new values and standards. In the asylums, great care was taken to make the girls 'sensible, morally good and industrious. To impart education to Santal boys, the missionaries set up a separate school for them.



6. ERADICATION OF SOCIAL EVILS: A BOLD STEP AGAINST INHUMAN PRACTICES

Incessantly did the missionaries urge the Government to remove social evils such as sati, female infanticide and human sacrifice among the tribal people. Though these were cruel practices, they were sanctioned as religious rites for them. Sati is the name given in India to a woman who immolates herself in the funeral pyre of her husband and denotes that the female is considered truthful to him, even unto death. As elsewhere this practice was widely prevalent in Orissa for long period of time. This practice of sati was severely criticized through periodicals and journals that helped in changing the mentality of the people and subsequently it was abolished in 1829 by Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General of India. It was really a noble work not only for the women of Orissa but also on India.

7. ABOLITION OF PILGRIM TAX: A GREAT RELIEF FOR THE PILGRIMS

Pilgrim tax, one of the most obnoxious taxes was paid by the pilgrims at Puri who visited Jagannath temple. It was collected the up keep of the temple. Besides that, annual grant was sanctioned by the British Government after their occupation of Orissa.¹¹ (Patra: 222). The Baptist missionaries pressed the Government to dissociate itself from the temple and stop collecting pilgrim tax¹² (Peggs: 133).

The pilgrim tax was regarded as 'great slur on the good name of the Christian Government. James Peggs, the missionary in Orissa described 'the support and protection of the Government is the great bulwark of Juggernaut's strength and all prevailing plea for his divinity. The system was inhuman, impolitic and unchristian and demanded its speedy abolition'¹³(loc.cit:267). The missionary societies in Orissa, Bengal and other places in India and also in England submitted petitions to the Government at all high levels for putting an end to the state patronage to the temple.

At last, constant missionary pressure obliged the Government to abolish the pilgrim tax in 1840 but the annual grant of money to the temple continued till 1863 when the Government dissociated itself from the temple administration retaining only a supervisory responsibility¹⁴(Patnaik:1989). The persistent effort of the missionaries became fruitful and it was a great relief for the pilgrims. They were also some extent successful in putting an end to the inhuman practice like self - immolation under the wheels of the chariot of Lord



Jagannath during car festival. Besides that, the missionaries also helped the pilgrims during car festival by providing medical facilities and other required necessities.

8. FIGHTING CASTE PREJUDICES: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO BUILD CORDIAL AMBIANCE IN THE SOCIETY

The missionaries made some constant efforts to remove caste prejudices from the society. In the realm of Christianity, there was no caste system and untouchability. So, they took vigorous steps and made tours to teach the evils of caste system that how it was a great remonstrance for the social mobility. Even the native Christians were renounced their own caste publicity. At the same time, they criticized the caste prejudice, its rigidity and restriction particularly the superiority of the higher castes. The missionaries also encouraged inter caste marriage and inter dining among the native Christians to minimize caste restriction.

Due to assimilation and mutual invitation to their respective houses, friendly feeling was developed. Besides that, they met regularly on various occasions like X- mas holidays, Good Friday, Sunday worship and Easter. A type of cordial bond was built up among them. The lower caste people also accepted Christianity due to social cause. So, friendly atmosphere was created in the society and the path of social mobilization opened to all. As a result of this, the caste ridden society became flexible and began to low ebb.

9. MISSIONARY ACTIVITIES IN TRIBAL AREAS - AN ATTEMPT FOR EMANCIPATION FROM SUPERSTITION AND SOCIAL TABOOS.

The missionaries entered mostly the Khond dominated areas of Orissa because different inhuman practices like meriah and infanticide were vigorously practised among them. The British had known little of the Khonds of Orissa till 1836. In 1767 some reference to this tribe was made by the first resident of Ganjam Edward Cotsford. They were unknown to the Europeans till the Ghumsar disturbance of 1836. They came to limelight by the efforts of the Government officers and the Christian missionaries. The Khonds were a labourious and daring tribe. They were simple mountainous people. The only vices were that they were very revengeful, addicted to drinks and occasionally brutal passion was overpowering in them¹⁵ (JGH: 1987). Therefore, the missionaries tried to bring those uncivilized Khonds under the spell of civilization and it had a tremendous repercussion on the traditional tribal society.



The most inhuman practices of the Khonds were meriah or human sacrifice and female infanticide. These rites were widely practised till the middle of the 19th century. Meriah sacrifice was made in January every year on a full moon day and the purpose was the prevention of diseases and natural calamities. The sacrifice was made before Mother Earth. It was their belief that the blood of the victim would increase the redness of turmeric, their chief product. The flesh would increase the fertility of soil and finally the tears of victims would cause rain.

So, whenever the Kondhs wished to offer a meriah to their goddess, they would not steal the victim. They bought victim from the poor Kondhs who used to sell their children. There was no consideration of caste, colour, creed, religion or sex in the choice of the victims. The only restriction was that, the Kondh victim was not to be sacrificed in his own village and by his own community. If necessary, victim could be exchanged for another to avoid such a problem.

The man destined to be sacrificed was immediately carried before the God and a small quantity of rice, coloured saffron was put upon his head. From the moment of his seizure till he was sacrificed, he was kept in a continuous state of stupefaction or intoxication. He was allowed to wander about the village and to do anything he desired. On the morning set apart for the sacrifice, the victim was carried before the idol in a state of intoxication. One of the villagers officiated as a priest, who cut a small hole in the stomach of the victim and with the blood that flew from the wound, the idol was besmeared. Then the crowd from the neighboring villages rushed forward to the altar of sacrifice where the victim was literally cut into pieces and each villager carried away a limp of the flesh and presented it to the idol in his own village. A sacrifice was never offered in any village oftener than once in twelve years, nor was there even more than one victim. At a place called 'Bundare' in Bissam Cuttack, the human sacrifice that took place was called 'Junna' in honour of the God of Battle "Maniksoro."

The practice was very peculiar to the Kondhs of Jeypore. A stout wooden post about 6 foot long was firmly fixed on the ground at the foot of which a narrow grave was dug and to the top of the post the victim was firmly fastened by the long hair of his head. Four assistants held his arms and legs outstretched, the body being suspended horizontally over the grave, with the face towards the earth. The officiating Jani or priest stood on the right side and



performed the ceremony with the following invocation while hacking his sacrificing knife on the back part of the shrinking victim's neck, "O" Mighty Manik Soro ! This is your festal day. To the Kondhs, the offering is meriah, to the king Junna. On account of this sacrifice you have given to King Kingdom, guns and swords. The sacrifice we now offer, you must eat and we pray that our battle-axes may be converted into swords, our bows and arrows into guns, powder and balls and if we have any quarrels with other tribes, give us the victory and preserve us from the tyranny of kings and their officers"¹⁶ (Padhi:1992). Then he addressed the victim and took the pretext that, it is not their sin but on the parents' who had sold the victim to them.

At last, the victim was decapitated and the body thrown into the grave and the head left suspended from the post till devoured by wild beasts. The knife remained suspended from the post till the three sacrifices were performed and until it was removed with much ceremony. The meriah sacrifice was extensively practised in the hill tracts of Ghumsar and the neighbouring tracts of Boudh and Dasapalla.

When it came to the notice of the Government some steps were taken for its suppression. From 1837 to 1845 the Government tried to rescue the meriahs by the policy of persuasion and repression. Poor children were kidnapped and purchased by the Khonds to be offered as sacrifice. But the policy of persuasion which the government adopted was criticized by the Christian missionaries as it did not yield much result. After 1837, the missionaries reflected their ideas through the 'Friend of India' and other newspapers. They exhibited the horror of the practice and also criticized the government policy of persuasion, oppression and advice¹⁷ (Friends: 1841).

So, due to nonstop pressurization of missionaries, government adopted drastic steps for the suppression of the rite. In between 1837 to 1853, more than fifteen hundred meriahs were rescued and entrusted to the care of the missionaries of Orissa¹⁸ (Das:44). The missionaries received monthly allowance of three rupees for the care of one rescued meriah child. They were kept in the orphanages of Cuttack, Berhampur and Balasore. As many as seventy nine meriahs were sent to the Cuttack orphanage by Campbell in 1849. In the asylum, the meriahs were provided with education and other trainings. Even after schooling the missionaries took steps for the rehabilitation of the meriahs¹⁹ (CHO: 1839). Now-a-days, the tribal substitute a buffalo or a goat in place of human sacrifice.



Marriages were arranged for them by the Orissa missionaries mainly between the inmates of two different asylums. Marriages of Jacob with Mukhi, Peter with Mula, Rachel with Daniel were some of the examples. Christian villages were set up where new couples would settle down. Some of them were employed as teachers and preachers of their own tribe. The missionaries provided land at Padripalli, Berhampur where the meriahs settled down as cultivators. Thus, the missionaries after exploration of the Khond tracts set up mission stations there. The endeavour of the missionaries for the abolition of the inhuman practice meriah was in fact commendable and it had incredible impact on the present - day society.

10. FEMALE INFANTICIDE - A VICTIM OF SUPERSTITION

In addition to Meriah, the female infanticide was also another brutal practice which was prevalent among the Khonds of Ganjam district and in some other places of Orissa. After traveling around the Khond tracts, the missionaries tried for its abolition. It was practised in the middle Khond region except Dige and Bodogoro. According to their belief, it was a disgrace to give their daughters in marriage to others rather they considered it as a mark of prestige to marry the daughters of foreign lands. So, they preferred to destroy the female babies in their infancy. Expenses of marriage were also another cause which prompted them to do that. So, the killing of a female child was associated with superstitions and poverty.

In the Jeypore estate, the factor that determined the life and future of the female children was very peculiar. Soon after the birth of a female child, the Jani or village priest used to make the horoscope of the girl and if it was found that the child was not born with good and bright future, she was then allowed to be killed, to which the parents had no objection. In some cases, the astrologer used to predict whether a particular female child would be responsible for the death of the Father. By calculating the movements of the stars, he used to predict the danger awaiting the parents and other kith and kin. Consequently, she was mercilessly killed.

It is evident from an extract of a letter from Rev. A. Sutton of Balasore in Orissa in August, 1828, that the female children were very much neglected. They were brought up without natural affection. Such was the miserable condition of girl children on the eve of the coming of missionaries to Orissa. The missionaries realized the gravity of this cruel practice and incessantly pressurized the Government for its eradication. The abolition of the infanticide in India has been the triumph of the philanthropist and the subject of History²⁰ (Peggs: 131).



10. CONCLUSION:

By rendering various services to the sick and sufferings the missionaries came closer to the common people and produced a very favourable ambience for social transform. Speaking on the useful role of the missionaries, Mr David B. Smith wrote 'The missionaries however of Orissa are not only apostles of evangelization and education though such is certainly the chief and of their ambition but they are the friends of sanitation, the dispensers of medicine to the sick, the clothiers of the naked, the feeders of the hungry, the shelter of the exposed, the guardians of friendless widows and orphans. They have an intimate knowledge of the people, their language, their modes of thought, and their every day wants. They have rescued many children from poverty, prostitution and immolation²¹ (Quoted: 1968). Thus, the missionaries through various efforts produced a sort of reaction among the people leading to socio - religious reforms and reconstruction of the society according to contemporary needs of Orissa. As a result a great social change was thus witnessed.

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