

Christian Missionaries and Knowledge System in Modern India: Special Reference to Eastern Adivasis

*Joseph Bara
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi*

The role of Christian missionaries in modern Indian history in the field of creative knowledge and education is well known. Fr. Camil Bulcke in Hindi literature and lexicography, Fr. Eugene Lafont in nineteenth century science movement, Rev. P.O. Bodding and Fr. J.B. Hoffmann on tribal studies, Fr J. Heras on Indology and Indian history and Rev. J.N. Farquhar on Hinduism are some of the leading examples. The missionary studies in some of the areas are relevant and even indispensable for present-day research work, more so on studies on Santhals, Mundas, Uraons and other Adivasis of eastern India.

The missionary interest in Indian studies developed out of the missionary exigency of knowing the Indian people – their beliefs, social habits and cultural sentiments. The knowledge would help them to prove the superiority of Christianity over local beliefs. In the early phase of missionary operation under the British rule, the missionaries assumed India as a Hindu country. For this reason they took special interest in Sanskrit studies. The missionaries also believed that the Brahmins who dealt with the Hindu knowledge system were the crucial authorities of Hinduism. This led Jesuit missionary, Roberto Di Nobili, in south India to adopt Brahminical ways of living and pursue study of sacred books of Hinduism. Special interest on Sanskritic studies was shown by the British Baptists, led by William Carey, J. Marshman and William Ward as well in the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Unlike Di Nobili and his Jesuit colleagues who commented on Hinduism little, the British Baptists were quite critical of Hinduism and wrote extensively on it. Ward's *History, Literature and Mythology of the Hindoos* in four volumes, published in 1817-1820, is the best representative writing in this respect. The early nineteenth was the period of Orientalism, i.e. Western scholarship on India from Western viewpoint and for colonial use. Combining their missionary object, the Baptists became active agents of

Orientalist knowledge, distinguishing themselves as Western scholars on India. Because of his learning, Carey was appointed Professor of Bengali at the Fort William College, Calcutta that imparted Oriental knowledge to young European civil servants. In 1818, they opened their college, the Serampore College, the first missionary college, near Calcutta.

The British Baptists chose to ignore the upper castes, especially the Brahmins as a way for winning converts. Against this, the Scottish missionary, Alexander Duff, recognized the Brahminical clout over Indian society. He made earnest effort to win over the Brahmins and other upper castes. Unlike the Baptists, he adopted the means of advanced English education, for which he established the General Assembly's Institution (later Free Church Institution that exists at Kolkata even today as Scottish College) in 1830. Duff admitted Hindu boys of the upper castes and was highly critical of Hinduism. Interestingly, despite fierce criticism of Hinduism, his college was popular among the upper class Hindus. None other than Rammohun Roy, the father of Indian Renaissance, arranged Duff his first students and supported the college throughout.

A talented teacher, Duff could win a number of converts from the upper castes. But his approach was not workable after 1850. The upper caste English-educated initiated to reform the Indian society and religion instead of accepting Christianity. Missionary pondering for an alternative missionary path led to the idea of missionary higher English education for Christian evangelization, i.e. education for Christian influence which would, in due course, lead to Christian India; conversion under this was a secondary purpose. The missionaries were also convinced at this stage that criticizing Hinduism with insufficient knowledge was not desirable, as it was likely to be counterproductive to the missionary object. This directed the missionaries for sympathetic understanding of Hinduism. The move resulted in, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, some of the best literature on Hinduism from the missionary pen.

The missionaries were the product of Evangelicalism movement in the modern West. Though they accompanied colonialism, they were not the integral part of British colonialism. They were officially allowed missionary work only after 1813. At times they were supported by individual colonial authorities and at times not. If there were cases of collaboration, there were also numerous cases of clash. Yet, the missionaries were ubiquitous fact of the colonial rule. Different missionary groups, and within groups, different

individual missionaries adopted different strategies for winning a Christian India. Some based themselves at headquarter towns, but many others stationed themselves in the interiors. So far as knowledge on the colonial people and society in the inner parts of the colonial territory is concerned, the missionaries emerged as better Western experts than the administrators and military campaigners, who either ruled from camp offices or paid flash visits.

Close contact with the local society was in itself not enough for the making of a right body of knowledge by the missionary hand. Missionary priority and outlook on the local society were detrimental to it. In case of the Adivasi society of eastern India, for a long time the missionary priority was large scale conversion. The missionaries turned attention to the Adivasis following the early nineteenth century realization by many of them that hard work among the upper castes had not yielded commensurate number of converts. Some explored the possibility of directly approaching the masses instead of waiting for the Brahmins' Pied Piper's role indefinitely.

The Adivasis – Santhals, Hos, Mundas, Uraons and so on – did not respond to the missionary overtures for conversion instantaneously. The first Uraon converts in Chhotanagpur, for instance, came in 1850 after five years of hard work by the German missionaries. The Adivasis agreed to join Christianity, chiefly as barter for missionary help in their fight with the landlords for land rights; they found Christianity appealing only secondarily because of its simple teaching. In the beginning the missionaries took the Adivasis as backward Hindus, as the Western colonial ethnographers did. That made them to denounce the tribal society as savage and barbarian and advocated its cure by Western 'civilization' agenda. Village after village had converted. This bound the missionaries to open schools of the middle level to raise local missionary workers. This policy continued for long decades at the cost of tribals' educational development. In the Chhotanagpur region, where missionary enterprise progressed faster than elsewhere, the first missionary high schools came only after fifty years of the missionary beginning.

The missionary method of conversion entailed the study of the traditional agrarian system of the Adivasis. Day-to-day dealing in the land cases convinced the missionaries of the significance and centrality of land in the Adivasi life. But the missionaries took long years to write on the subject. Intensive missionary writing on Adivasi land system and culture came since

the late nineteenth century. It was propelled by Christian missionary humanitarianism that afforded intimate and sympathetic understanding of the Adivasi society and culture. The half-a-century of close observation made a section of missionaries proficient experts on the Adivasi life. For the first time detailed and comprehensive accounts on the Adivasi life and culture were composed. The works of J.B. Hoffmann on the Mundas and others, of A. Grignard and P.S. Dehon on Uraons, and of P.O. Bodding on the Santhals are the product of this phase. These were unlike the survey data by the colonial government that were often disjointed or incomplete. The Adivasis also found in the missionaries the first and the rare of friend in their long history of outsiders' exploitation. They were willing to reveal intimate facts to the missionaries which they would normally not do, since hitherto all outsiders misused their revealed knowledge to exploit them. The only other comparable figure in this respect was S.C. Roy who wrote extensively on the Mundas and Uraons. Like the missionary humanitarians, Roy was rose above his narrow avocation of legal practice to understand the Adivasis closely and sympathetically.