

CONCLUSION

The present is better understood in the light of the past. The lessons of the past and the experiences of the present should help in planning for a meaningful future. This is precisely the role of history and historical studies. The historian's task is to bring to light the relevant past to help the present generation face the future. In the preceding pages an attempt was made to recognise those issues and events, which shaped the Catholic Church in Orissa. Therefore, the history recounted was an encounter of the Dalits and Tribals of Orissa with Christianity. It attempted to describe the circumstances in which the Catholic missionaries proclaimed God's word, the means they employed to make it understandable and acceptable and, finally, the response of the people. The Catholic Church in Orissa grew as a result of the inadequacy of the old religions to liberate the Dalits and Tribals from the clutches of the world of spirits that seemed to control human destiny. The missionaries' alertness and their promptness in responding to the outrages of a powerful minority against a powerless majority produced positive results. British colonial rule made it possible for the church to extend her activity over the entire Indian sub-continent, even if it did not favour her directly.

When the Dalits and Tribals of Orissa were hard-pressed by their powerful neighbours, the missionaries shared with them a religion which gave them hope. To the missionaries these 'primitive' peoples held a special value as God's children. They felt it their duty to do something to alleviate their suffering. The Dalits and Tribals longed for liberation, respect and dignity. The missionaries offered a faith which satisfied those longings.

The missionaries did not do anything extraordinary to attract the attention of the Dalits and the Tribals. All they did was to sympathise with the oppressed and to plead for justice on their behalf. Some of the missionaries successfully identified with the Dalits and the Tribals by adopting their language, customs and life-style as their own. In this way they became genuine ambassadors, communicating their cultural richness to the non-tribal and non-Dalit world. All this the missionaries did in obedience to their Master's command of love.

The Inspirational Source

In their missionary activities, the Jesuits and the Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales fulfilled the church's missionary mandate. Pope John Paul II's *Redemptoris Missio* declares that, "the Church is called to bear witness to Christ by taking courageous and prophetic stands in the face of corruption of political or economic power by not seeking her own glory and material wealth; by using her resources to serve the poorest of the poor and by imitating Christ's own simplicity of life".¹

The critics of Christianity claim that the history of Christianity among the Dalits and Tribals was one of aggression and the forcible transplantation of a European church. In the preceding pages it was made clear that the Dalits and the Tribals accepted Christianity on their own. The village delegations could prove such claims. However, the mission work was not without obstacles and difficulties. The initial response of the people in Ganjam

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Encyclical Letter 'Redemptoris Missio'*, 43.

was so negative that the missionaries had to re-examine their work in the area. In their frustration, they even called the territory a 'cursed land'. But this a situation changed in 1866 because of the Orissa famine. The missionaries dedicated themselves to the service of the poor and orphans. Henceforth, the missionaries did not have to hunt for conversions; seeing the goodness of the missionaries, the people sent delegations to invite them to their villages.

The Dalits and Tribals of Orissa, who knew nothing else but estrangement and oppression, experienced a renewed dignity and hope for the future in the presence and activities of the missionaries. To the simple and peace-loving Dalits and Tribals, this was the good news that the new religion proclaimed. For the missionaries' religion understood the longings of the Tribals and the Dalits and attempted to liberate them from the clutches of slavery and any kind of oppression that degrades the human person, who is made in the image of God.

Liberative Mission

In their efforts to preach the love of God, the missionaries struck at the root of evil by struggling with the oppressed to seek justice. The one fact that was indelibly etched in the memory of the Mundas, Oraons and Kharias was that they were the descendants of the original settlers. For them, the one who cleared the forest and settled on the land was its owner. They were willing to sacrifice anything, even their own religion, in order to live at peace with their ancestors who had cleared the forest tracts and cultivated them. The Belgian Jesuits not only understood this basic principle but also made efforts to help reclaim their property. They even induced the British government to enact laws in favour of the Tribals.

It is true that initially the Kondhs and Panos focused on the material advantages of the presence of the missionary and his work. But it does not follow that this continued to be their motivation. Dick Kooiman has pointed out that,

the change of religion as a strategy for survival is not a one-way solution, people may turn to Christianity, but there is also the return option: when people try to ward off the dangers threatening their existence they may give priority to ancestral beliefs and practices. Secondly, a close reading of the missionary sources reveals that famines and other cases of emergency merely create a kind of rush hour in already existing religious boundary traffic. Whether the main stream is away from or back to the religion of origin is to a large extent determined by an assessment of the alternative options available to the people concerned.²

Had the Tribals and Dalits considered only material benefits, two possible effects would have happened in the Kondh Mountains: there would have been a either mass conversion to Christianity or an exodus back to their traditional religion once the expected gains failed to reach them. But neither occurred. The poor, illiterate and ignorant people of the mountains were initially hesitant and analysed every action of the missionary before they finally accepted baptism. Once baptised, they remained faithful -- at least the vast majority of them.

Without doubt the Tribals of Chotanagpur were first drawn into the orbit of the

² D. KOOIMAN, "Mass Movement, Famine and Epidemic. A study in interrelationship", in *ICHR* 22/2 (1988) p. 128.

Catholic Church by social and economic motives. Their very existence and human dignity were at stake. It was the hope of legal protection that first drew them towards the church. However, the missionaries made no secret of the fact that the law alone would not save them. They brought moral and spiritual forces to bear upon the people. They made up for the rather sketchy initial instruction of the people at first by training them more systematically in the faith. Mission stations sprung up at strategic points among the Christian villages. Parishes were laid out with an eye to the future. Although the churches were usually not big enough to contain their entire congregations on Sundays and feast days, every centre had a presbytery, convent, school, dispensary and all the other institutions of a well-ordered parish.³ The mission stations became the centres of the life of the Tribals.

Another important factor for success among the Tribals of Gangpur was the missionary adaptation of certain cultural features: the missionary methods: village *Panchayats*, confederation of village *Panchayats*, traditional local leadership, the promotion of tribal unity, etc.⁴ It certainly must have been painful for these traditional and peace-loving people to give up the religion of their ancestors with its sacrifices to the spirits and its joyful dances. But they were able to give it up because Christianity did not deprive them of their religiosity but gave it new meaning. Sacrifices to the spirits (especially to the evil spirits) were replaced by devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, to saints and the guardian angels. The intensity of their traditional religious life was changed to intensity in their Christian lives.⁵ This spirit of cultural adaptation paved the way to the ever-increasing missionary expansion and allowed evangelisation to be successful.

Christianity also brought a transformation to society, giving it a new face, a new look. Its horizons widened and its behaviour changed. The social, economic, intellectual, moral and spiritual progress of Christians -- in short their complete transformation -- is the most convincing proof of their acceptance of a new faith. The Christianity in Gangpur is vibrant, like that visualised by Fr. Lievens. From the beginning the Jesuits promoted leadership among the laity. The church has produced excellent leaders, both lay and religious.⁶

Christianity and the People of Lower Origin

The critics of the Christian missions often ask: why does Christianity flourish among the Tribals and Dalits in India?⁷ They have adopted Christian faith, precisely because Christ, its founder, preached that all are brothers and sisters and that the exploitation and enslavement of others is a sin crying to heaven.⁸ Some people have

³ F.A. PLATTNER, *The Catholic India. Yesterday and Today*, Bombay 1964, p. 89.

⁴ B. TIRKEY, "The Adivasi and the Inculturated Theology", in *IMR* 7/2 (1985) p. 157.

⁵ F. DE SA, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, p. 336.

⁶ A. TIRKEY, "Father Constant Lievens, S.J. The Missionary", in *IMR* 7/2 (1985) p. 142.

⁷ Plattner comments: "Many Hindus claim that such conversions are due to the poverty and ignorance of the backward classes. They accuse the missionaries of offering these illiterate people loans, gifts and all sorts of alms in order to convert them to Christianity." F.A. Plattner, *The Catholic Church in India*, op. cit., p. 147.

⁸ S. FUCHS, "A new Mission Method for India", in *Verbum* SVD 13/3 (1972) p. 231.

questioned the Tribals acceptance of the Christian faith *en masse*, since they say, it was not based purely on religious motives. Yet Jesus himself was not satisfied with prayers and sacrifices. He condemned social injustice and economic exploitation, he insisted that all human beings are equal before God and have basic rights which no power on earth can deprive them of.⁹ People follow Jesus' example when they demand justice and oppose social exploitation and degradation.¹⁰ This is exactly what the missionaries in Orissa did. The Dalits and Tribals of Orissa soon discovered that the Catholic missionaries were deeply interested in their welfare. Once they were convinced of this, they came to the missionaries in large numbers. They may have come first for advice in their land disputes and legal matters. But later they came asking to be received into the church.

After having witnessed the struggles of the Dalits and Tribals, the missionaries were convinced that the work of evangelisation had to be accompanied by a struggle for human justice. Had they simply carried on social work among the Dalits and Tribals by opening free dispensaries and schools, they might have succeeded in calming the unrest among the people. But ultimately this would have benefited the exploiters more than the exploited. Though illiterate, the Dalits and Tribals still retained their sense of human dignity and their fond memory of being descendants of the original settlers of the soil. They were willing neither to be enslaved nor to be reduced to the state of receiving alms. The missionaries sought genuine remedies for the problems of the Dalits and Tribals, and nothing short of that would satisfy them.

The Tribal converts began to show a spirit of independence and resistance to the illegal exactions of the landlords. At the same time, rumours of converts' winning court cases strengthened the belief that it was easier to win cases if one became a convert, which encouraged people to seek baptism. Generally came the Tribals into the church in groups, retaining their traditional clan affiliations. Inspired and aided by the missionaries, the Tribals began to seek their rights through legal means and refused to comply with the traditional free labour.¹¹ Not all those seeking justice were actually Christians, since many had not been baptised nor even had begun taking instructions.¹²

The Christian missionaries established schools, colleges, hospitals, dispensaries, orphanages and institutions for the maimed and handicapped. They gave unheard-of opportunities to members of the neglected classes, some of whom had important positions in the institutions they ran. Their emphasis on education, including teacher-training and offers of free education, has attracted many people. Others have been drawn by the colourful forms of worship and by the fact that the Roman Catholic community has demanded fewer changes in traditional customs. For these and other reasons, even some Protestants have joined the Roman Catholic community.¹³

The Fransalians and the Jesuits

Both Fransalians and the Jesuits worked with the people of lower origin

⁹ Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 234.

¹¹ F. DE SA, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, p. xv.

¹² Ibid., p. 328.

¹³ B.M. BOAL, "The church in the Kond hills," p. 273.

who were neglected by both Hindus and civil authorities. The Dalits and Tribals lived in the forest and were often deprived of basic amenities. Though they attributed their misery to the rapacity of evil spirits, they hoped that one day they would have plenty. Their social cohesiveness worked in favour of conversions.

The Fransalian and the Jesuit missions, however, were not identical. There were some differences. The growth in Ganjam mission of the MSFS was never consistent. The missionaries were often frustrated with the lukewarmness and indifference of the people. Their lack of response almost prompted the Fransalians to give up their mission. Nevertheless, natural calamities and tragedies forced them to continue with the mission work. The Fransalians, as they are called in India, would have done much better if they had restricted themselves to a small portion of their gigantic mission. But it is useless to philosophise about what should have been done one hundred and fifty years ago. In any case the intrepid Savoyards boldly faced their daunting task. They struggled with a harsh climate, diverse languages, and long distances. But since they were only a handful of missionaries, they could not concentrate on the consolidation of the neophytes.

The Belgian Jesuits in Gangpur were better situated. Many aspects worked in their favour: Gangpur was an extension of the mission of Chotanagpur; the missionaries did not have to start with basics like language, culture, etc.; there was long period of preparation between the first contact and the establishment of Kesramal, the first parish in Gangpur; and above all, the missionaries encountered the relatives of the people living in the Chotanagpur mission. However, the Jesuits also faced difficulties: the hostile attitude of the raja; the distance from the Ranchi, which limited them to attending only important meetings; and the poor resources to support the mission.

Every missionary has limitations and weaknesses. It would be naïve to presume that as soon as they stepped on foreign soil they automatically became saints. They had their share of scandals, prejudices, disappointments and failures. Some of the missionaries appeared as benevolent Zamindars who went about their own way. Sometimes there were conflicts between the messengers of the gospel. But on the whole, through their simplicity and dedication, they have won the respect of the Dalits and Tribals of Orissa.

This study obviously is not the last word on the subject proposed. If it helps to throw light on the history of the Catholic Church in Orissa, it will have served its purpose. In accepting the new faith the simple people in the mountains realised that they did not lose their traditions: their culture, their dances, their songs, etc. On every festive occasion the old drums still roll and the feet still move. Whoever has met the Dalits and Tribals of Orissa cannot help wishing them a happy future.