

## Chapter V

# Missionary Methods

India has always been a magnet for missionary efforts, and those who had the 'quest for souls' never lost their passionate attachment to it.<sup>1</sup> Though challenging, India with its multi-racial and multi-religious background offered an ideal field for missionaries, provided they went into the interior villages. There is no doubt that the ultimate goal of the Catholic missionaries in preaching to the Aborigines and Dalits of Orissa was their conversion. The missionaries considered it their sacred duty to save souls and to bring the people to the knowledge of the truth. The number of converts a missionary gained measured his success and failure.

To obtain their goal, the missionaries of the nineteenth century used methods and approaches that were both traditional and new. They were convinced that they were called to 'civilise' a people that was still primitive and 'groping in darkness'.<sup>2</sup> The opening of schools, dispensaries and hospitals, orphanages, maternity centres, vocational institutions, cooperative societies and other social works were the methods usually adopted. Though it is said that these institutions were primarily meant for Christians, non-Christians could also benefit from their services. Therefore the establishment of schools, hospitals, orphanages and other charitable institutions were primarily oriented to this singular purpose.

The passing of time and an appropriate distance from the field of their work might permit us to evaluate the mission in Orissa. The method used there was the best that the missionaries knew. They saw themselves as coming from a superior civilisation, and they had an absolutist understanding of Christianity. Hence, they felt the obligation and urgency to give the treasure they had to the underprivileged 'primitive people'. It was typical of the epoch to follow the methods that were suitable for the particular territory and the particular religious congregation. Since religious orders spearheaded the missionary movements, they not only unified their efforts but also made sure of its continuity. Stephen Neill commented: "On the Roman Catholic side, there were considerable varieties in missionary practice as between the various religious orders, and as between the orders and the secular clergy."<sup>3</sup>

In the absence of a common method for the Ganjam mission, the MSFS sought those approaches that were suited to their particular situation. Apart from some limited instructions from their superiors, the missionaries in Ganjam had little guidance in their efforts to 'save souls'. The Jesuit mission in Gangpur was better placed, as the missionaries could follow the pattern of the Chotanagpur mission. This chapter will

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<sup>1</sup> DEWI MORGEN, "Christian Expansion Since 1900", in S. NEILL (ed.), *Twentieth Century Christianity*, London 1961, p. 245.

<sup>2</sup> A letter of Fr. Bonaventure portrays the mentality of the epoch and the sense of urgency which the missionaries felt: "Dans l'Inde le missionnaire a sous les yeux un carnaval perpétuel, chaque indien est un masque en réalité. Son âme est en la possession du démon; son visage tatoué, caricature en cent façons diverses, porte les détestables empreintes de la bête; et cette vue continuelle dégoûte bientôt les plus entichés des mascarades du carnaval." Bonaventure to his uncle, Surada, February 21, 1882, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>3</sup> S. NEILL, *A History of Christianity in India 1707 – 1858*, vol. II, Cambridge 1985, p. 394.

attempt to highlight and evaluate the methods of both missionary congregations in attracting the Tribals and Dalits of Orissa to the faith. In their zeal the missionaries sometimes exhibited negative features that, even though did not cause the demise of the mission, certainly did not foster friendly relations with the people. However, it is to be borne in mind that there was no single method that was applicable to all the mission stations and accepted by all the missionaries.

## **5.1 Ganjam Mission**

Though the missionaries working in the Ganjam mission did not have a highly organised method like the Jesuits in Chotanagpur, they used the strategies they believed would bring them conversions. The missionaries were at liberty to choose the method suitable to the place where they were posted.<sup>4</sup> Keeping in mind the socio-economic condition of the people, the missionaries framed a method that they thought would bring them the desired results.

### **5.1.1 Spiritual Activities**

Spiritual activities such as popular devotions did not directly produce conversions. Nevertheless, besides providing a way of conserving the faith of the neophytes, they bore testimony to the non-Christians, particularly those who came into frequent contact with the missionaries and Christians.

#### **5.1.1.1 Establishment of Catechumenates**

The establishment and running of catechumenates were some of the important duties of the MSFS in the Ganjam mission. It was the sure means of teaching religion to the Kondhs and Panos. Possibly the catechumenate programmes gave the missionaries an occasion to maintain close contact with the people, at least in the initial stage of their apostolate. It was also an occasion for the missionaries to teach the people 'civilisation', as they would claim.<sup>5</sup> Catechumens were divided into small groups based on the number in a village and on the level of the people's understanding. One of the main activities of the catechumenate was teaching the prayers and some fundamental truths of Christianity. In teaching the prayers the missionaries claimed to follow the instruction of St. Francis Xavier, who recommended that the missionary himself teach the prayers to his neophytes.

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<sup>4</sup> Fr. Avrillon wrote: "Vous serez étonnés de voir une procession le soir de la fête des rois. Ici de la part des supérieurs autorisés, même les missionnaires ont la permission de faire ce que demandent les circonstances et le bien des âmes." Avrillon to Superior, Palcondah, (no date and month) 1867, AMSFS 5H5-2/1.

<sup>5</sup> Recording the positive influence of the catechumenate in the mission, Fr. Tissot wrote: "Ils perdraient leurs habitudes sauvages . . . et se formaient facilement aux habitudes religieuses". J.M. Tissot to Monsieur Mermier, Surada, June 30, 1859, AMSFS 5H5-2/1; Descombes to J. Tissot, Surada, May 8, 1883, AMSFS 5H5-2/2. Some of the missionaries considered the behaviour of the people to be 'half-savage'. But through fervent prayers and other spiritual activities the missionaries saw a change in the neophytes. Cf. Msgr. Clerc to a priest in France, Visakhapatnam, April 9, 1913, AMSFS 5H5-2/4.



The instructions preparing the people for baptism generally lasted a month.<sup>6</sup> Fr. Bonaventure found the catechumenate method effective, since it provided an occasion for him to give thorough spiritual formation to small groups of catechumens. Citing one of the letters of Fr. J.M. Descombes, F. Moget wrote: “Catechumens in villages are divided into groups and are given a course of instruction lasting a month. We teach them the knowledge of God, creation, providence, sin and forgiveness, the incarnation of Christ, the redemption, the sacraments, the study of prayers.”<sup>7</sup> Commenting on the suitability of the method for the Ganjam mission, Fr. Bonaventure wrote:

My way of evangelisation is a little different, peculiar to Surada mission. The priest gathers two or three pagan families and gives them hospitality on our lands, a little material help. And I throw off the seed of the word of God. I had good success at times. Just now, I have 18 families of catechumens whom I am instructing, and with God’s grace, hope to baptise before the end of the year. How difficult it is to bring pagans to the service of God. The more educated are the most obstinate. We get only the poor.<sup>8</sup>

This method was directly opposed to that of Fr. Dupont, who concentrated on baptising as many people as possible without any preparation or an infrastructure to follow them. Though the method was inspired by the theological thinking of the time -- saving as many souls as possible for the glory of God -- it suffered a great setback when many of them defected for various reasons.

#### **5.1.1.2 Retreats and other Spiritual Activities**

Once a year the missionaries gathered Catholic men and women for the annual retreat, which as a rule was organised at the centre where the priest resided. During their stay, which lasted about three days, the participants were given further explanation of Christian doctrine or catechesis. The preachers helped the people to make a good confession and to receive communion. At the end of the retreat, the participants would promise to amend some of their old habits, such as drinking, smoking, etc. As far as possible the missionaries tried to invite the same priest for three consecutive years for

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<sup>6</sup> As a sign of their baptism, the Christians were given a medal to wear that usually aroused the curiosity of their non-Christian neighbours. Cf. Descombes to Tissot, Katingia, August 9, 1888, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>7</sup> Although it is not clear as to what the ‘thorough spiritual formation’ consisted of, the missionary claimed to have given it to the catechumens. It might have been the daily recitation of prayers and attendance at Mass and obviously a protection from ‘superstitious and pagan beliefs’. F. Moget, *Early Days of Visakhapatnam Mission 1846 – 1920*, p. 251.

<sup>8</sup> Bonaventure to the Superior General, Fr. J. Tissot, Surada, October 30, 1881, AMSFS; Bonaventure to his uncle, Surada, February 21, 1882, AMSFS 5H5-2/2. Fr. Cyrille thought that a similar method would be useful for Surada. He wrote: “Achetez des terres ayez beaucoup de rizières et établissez les catechumenats.” Cyrille to Superior General, Surada, December 15, 1915, AMSFS 5H5-2/4. The documents in the General Archives are silent about the results such a method produced, except that at a later date some of the families settled in the property of the mission sold the land and went to work in the tea gardens of Assam; In his report to the Sacred Congregation Msgr. Neyret wrote about the usefulness of the method for the Ganjam mission. Cf. Msgr. Neyret, “Recit Succint de l’état de la Mission de Vizagapatam. Depuis son origine, le 16 mars, jusqu’à sa division en deux Diocèses de Vizagapatam et de Nagpur le 29 juillet 1887”, Vizagapatam, April 11, 1888, APF Indie Orientali: Scrittura Riferite nei Congressi, vol. 33, f. 282.

the following reasons: (1) to evaluate whether the people understood what was said in the last retreat; (2) to continue the catechesis begun in the previous retreat; and (3) to evaluate whether the people were faithful to the promises made during the previous retreat. They believed that only in this way they would help the people in their faith-formation. Attendance in such gatherings was generally satisfactory.<sup>9</sup> In tune with the universal church and in the hope of improving the spiritual life of the people, the missionaries introduced the Apostleship of Prayer, which they claimed improved the faith-lives of the people.

### **5.1.2 Humanitarian Projects**

The missionaries' immediate and unreserved response to natural calamities produced its positive results, that is, people asked to join the church. Though the missionaries were seldom prepared for such disasters, the mission's growth often resulted from them. The MSFS were contemplating the abandonment of the mission when the Great Famine of 1866 occurred. This was followed by another famine in 1889. There were inundations, cholera and epidemics like smallpox that required medical and humanitarian assistance. In the absence of government services, the people had no other option but to accept help from them. The missionaries used these opportunities to show their kindness and generosity. When Kondh Christians were asked to state the reasons for their conversion, a sizable number stated that, "It is well to become part, that is, to find security with the Christian community."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> While the Jesuits in Gangpur insisted on the contribution of the participants for their maintenance during the retreat, it is not clear whether the MSFS insisted on it. In all likelihood, they may have provided for the stay.

<sup>10</sup> B.M. BOAL, "The Church in the Kond Hills", in V.E.W. HAYWARD (ed.), *The Church as Christian Community. Three Studies of North Indian States*, London 1966, p. 308.



### 5.1.2.1 Charity during Epidemics

Right from the beginning, the MSFS responded promptly and positively to natural calamities like famine, flood, cholera, etc. Very often these calamities left numerous orphans and widows, who wandered the streets or came to the mission with the hope of finding something to fill their stomachs. There were occasions when parents sold their children or abandoned them on the roads. They did this for two reasons. First, they hoped some kind people, like the missionaries whose charity extended to all, might take them into the orphanages. Second, the purification rules of the Hindus do not permit the presence of a dying person in the house. The missionaries took up the challenge by providing help to the starving and to the dying -- particularly the children. After all, they believed that they were called to help people in need. Hence, this was a unique opportunity to exhibit their charity. Though initially they lacked a definite plan, apart from nourishing the sick and baptising them *in articulo mortis*, the missionaries eventually arranged for the children to be brought up in the Christian faith and to be educated in schools.

### 5.1.2.2 Orphanages

As the gathered children increased in number during and after the Great Famine of 1866, the missionaries were obliged to open an orphanage in Surada. Initially they had no specific plan for the orphanage, apart from caring for the children's health. Once they were settled, they began to educate the children. Their education consisted of 'reading and writing', since, the missionaries thought that would suffice for those who would be involved in agriculture.

Since funds for the maintenance of the orphanages were limited, the missionaries purchased some fields that could be cultivated in order to make the orphanage self-sufficient. The governmental scheme of leasing forestland inspired the MSFS to lease large tracts of forest for a nominal price so they could be converted into arable fields. Grown-up boys from the orphanage were engaged in the cultivation of the land, while a priest supervised the work. Later, the cleared property was given to the married couples for settlement. Such settlements paved the way for the birth of Christian villages like Dantholinghy, Karicotte and Thotavally. These settlements were under the rigorous supervision of a priest, who even meted out physical punishments to wrongdoers. The missionaries took the liberty to correct the mistakes of the orphans and the Christians with the use of the cane.<sup>11</sup>

There were often tensions between the missionaries and the orphans who settled on the property and who were expected to repay something for the maintenance of the mission. It was very difficult for the people who had received so much from the mission to return something to it. Not only did they think that the mission did not require their help, but also they were of the opinion that the missionaries did not distribute what lawfully belonged to them. Dissatisfied with their situation in the orphanage, some of those who grew up there left Surada and went elsewhere to seek jobs. A small group left for the tea gardens in Assam. Since the residents of the orphanages were leaving the

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<sup>11</sup> Bonaventure to his uncle, Surada, December 5, 1881, AMSFS 5H5-2/2. In a similar way the servants of the missionaries had condemned the culpable to the strokes of a cane. Cf. Anthony Nidhi to Suiffet, Didrobady, July 1909, AMSFS 5H5-2/3.

settlement, the missionaries decided to reduce the property. They sold some of the fields in both Thotavally and Surada.<sup>12</sup>

Considering the work of MSFS in Ganjam, one is rather certain that the missionaries' help was timely and liberative, as it provided an immediate relief from the miserable condition of the orphans and widows. They also tried to provide a future for them. However, the settlements were not well-organised and provided limited educational advancement.

### 5.1.2.3 Distribution of Medicine

The medical mission was considered to be an effective *preparatio evangelica* in India. However, there was but a handful of medical personnel, and only a few were willing to move to the interior. The missionaries, who were convinced that the work of helping the poor and oppressed was an effective method of revealing the goodness and love of God, were happy to distribute medicine, since it brought them in close contact with the suffering and vulnerable people. In his simplicity, Fr. Descombes did all he could to alleviate the suffering of the sick. His knowledge of tropical diseases and the medicines to cure them came in handy, as the people could not afford to go to a hospital – which in any case was far from where they lived. The long distances and the poor means of transportation discouraged the sick and made them resign themselves to the skills of the village medicine man.

Under such circumstances, finding someone who knew the cure for a sickness and was even willing to provide free medicine was a blessing for the Kondhs and Panos.<sup>13</sup> We should recall that one of the first huts established in Katingia besides the chapel-cum-residence of the priest was a dispensary. The missionary's fame as a caring doctor spread throughout the vicinity, and people came to receive medicine from him. Dispensaries were also established in Surada, Gopalpur and Cuttack where the Sisters treated the people for all kinds of diseases.

The dispensaries established in the mission treated both Christians and non-Christians. Sometimes the non-Christians, when they came to the priest for medicine, would go to the chapel out of curiosity and then seek an explanation of the statues. This allowed the priest to give a short introduction to Christianity and its beliefs. The missionaries not only blessed the sick but also even encouraged them to pray to the Virgin Mary for a cure.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The resentment of the residents to the paternalistic approach of the missionaries led to a fundamental question: was the approach adopted by the missionaries right, or did they fail to understand the people they were dealing with? Descombes, Surada, May 1889, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>13</sup> Fr. Descombes illustrated how the neophytes attracted their relatives: "Ils ont dit 'vous nous connaissez, nous sommes de votre caste et nous sommes chrétiens, faites comme nous, les diables ne nous font jamais souffrir, sommes nous malades, le père vient nous voir, il nous donne des médecines et il nous guérit, quand il y a des querelles entre nous il nous réconcilie, avons-nous des tracasseries de la part d'autrui, le père nous protège et prend notre cause en mains'." Descombes to Tissot, Katingia, August 9, 1888, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>14</sup> Fr. Descombes wrote that the people prayed in front of the statue of Our Lady: "Mahaprabou moté bolo coro: habeo me sanum". Ibid.



#### 5.1.2.4 Schools

The spread of education in India today is to a large extent the merit of the Christian missionaries. Missionaries of all denominations took upon themselves the task of establishing schools, even in small villages in the remotest corners of India. Missionaries, irrespective of their denomination, considered educational institutions essential to the progress of the mission. The establishment of schools in the Ganjam Mission was very dear to the MSFS.<sup>15</sup>

The school in Surada provided education for a large number of children. However, the Kondhs had a tendency to avoid the school, for the simple reason that going to school would not feed them. So the missionaries looked for various ways to attract the Kondhs to the school. They finally decided to provide midday meals for the children attending the school. This did attract students, but it added another problem to the poor mission: finding the money to pay for the meals. The missionaries felt the need to sacrifice some of their personal expenses in order to help the poor people.<sup>16</sup>

#### 5.1.2.5 Friendly Relations

Simplicity of life and personal rapport with the people were the hallmarks of the missionaries' efforts to evangelise them. There were times when the missionaries felt that their preaching fell on deaf ears. Based on their experience at Gojolibady, the missionaries realised that in order to convert the Kondhs they had to become one of them and they had to prove that the missionaries were their friends. Despite some threats and intimidation, the missionaries were not disturbed because they received the support of some of the leading members of the community. In fact, establishing a friendly rapport with the village or tribal chiefs was important for the progress of the mission. In order to obtain this useful rapport some of the missionaries did not hesitate to grant them monetary benefits whenever possible.<sup>17</sup> Both the 'Rules for the Conduct of Missionaries in Orissa' and the 'Synod of Visakhapatnam', exhorted the missionaries to establish good relations with the local officials, village chiefs, *Panches*, etc. However, extending monetary benefits to the village chiefs and other important persons created some unexpected tensions in the missions. The missionaries were also friendly with the Indian *baboos*, lower officials in the government.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Msgr. Tissot wrote: "Il est à remarquer que les écoles sont un grand moyen d'avoir accès auprès des Indiens, d'acquérir sur eux de l'influence, de diminuer leur préjugés et de leur communiquer les vérités chrétiennes." Msgr. Tissot, *Copie du Compte-rendu général de l'établissement du progrès, et de l'état actuel du vicariat apostolique de Vizagapatam. Envoyé à Msgr. Agliardi, Déléгат Apostolique dans l'Inde*, APF Indie Orientali: Scrittura Riferite nei Congressi, vol. 26 (1886), f. 661.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Tissot to Gaidon, Yanaon, November 21, 1859, AMSFS 5H5-2/1.

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note the comments of Fr. Marolliat in one of the letters of to his brother: "Grâce a Dieu, ils ne peuvent pas me faire beaucoup de mal, car j'ai les deux chefs de caste les plus influents de mon côté, et je les tiens solidement attachés mon char grâce à des prêts d'argent que je leur ai faits." MAROLLIAT, "Informations Diverses: Vizagapatam (Hindoustan)", in *LMC* 46 (1914), p. 171.

<sup>18</sup> Rey to the Director, Cuttack, August 6, 1884, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

### 5.1.3 Socio-cultural projects

Living close to nature, Kondhs and Panos are influenced by the rhythms of nature, which often play an important role in their culture and tradition. They revere their culture and tradition as well as the memory of their ancestors. Having noticed this interdependence, the MSFS sought to incorporate it into the life of the church.

#### 5.1.3.1 Adaptation/Inculturation

Inspired by the work of Fr. Robert de Nobili, the missionaries were convinced that the conversion of a good number of Brahmin families would help them in the conversion of inferior castes and would also remove the stigma attached to Christianity as a religion for people of lower origin. Therefore, in the hope of converting the higher castes, the missionaries adapted the way of life of the Brahmin *Sanyasis*. Though one could admire the flexibility and openness of the missionaries to change their life style and approach, they were too quick to throw out a method that did not produce the desired results. This gives the impression that they wanted immediate responses and they thought it would be rather easy to convert an orthodox group like the Brahmins.<sup>19</sup>

Three to four years of living out the method was, by any standard, a relatively short period of time. They also applied the method of Fr. De Nobili without considering the background of the people they were interested in converting. They went ahead with it without really contemplating whether such a method was suitable for the particular situation. The abrupt departure of Fr. Seigneur from the mission also gives the impression that depth was lacking in the entire project. One must remember that Fr. De Nobili took a lifetime to convert the Brahmins of Madurai and Tiruchirappally. In spite of all his dedication and sacrifices, the conversions obtained were not in big numbers. It was not just a change of eating habits, dress and study of Hindu scriptures that made the method relevant and effective, but a constant conversion of self, of adaptation and of understanding the ethos of the people.

The question of the Malabar Rites Controversy was still under discussion, and the Holy See was still demanding an oath from the missionaries working in Madurai, Mysore and the Carnatic region, when the MSFS in Ganjam opted for trying the method in Orissa. Only on April 9, 1940, were the missionaries (working in the above-mentioned region) finally dispensed from the oath relating to the Malabar rites.<sup>20</sup>

It is no exaggeration to state that the MSFS found some values in the feasts and cultural practices of Panos and Kondhs. Possibly influenced by the Jesuits and their adaptation method, the MSFS were of the opinion that the mission should adapt to the feasts and customs that are not contrary to Christian doctrine. In fact, they were

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<sup>19</sup> The frustration of the missionaries and their superiors is clear in the letter of Msgr. Neyret. He wrote: "Donc si toutes les tentatives de nos pères à convertir les païens de caste . . . nous prouvant qu'il n'y a absolument rien à espérer de cette race". Neyret to Monsieur Mermier, Visakhapatnam, August 20, 1860, AMSFS 5H5-2/1.

<sup>20</sup> V. CRONIN, "Malabar Rites Controversy", in *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, vol. IX, p. 98.



interested in Christianising some of the feasts. However, this option never became a reality.<sup>21</sup>

### 5.1.3.2 Itinerant Monks

Like the Protestant missionaries, some MSFS felt the urge to proclaim God's Word directly, i. e., as itinerant preachers. They would preach the gospel in the market and in other places where people gathered. They were convinced by Matt10:14 that the duty of the messenger of God was to proclaim God's Word without any hesitation, whether the people received it or not. Here the missionary does not bother with conversion, because he believes that conversion is God's work.<sup>22</sup> The number of missionaries adhering to this method was small, and the method itself was not acceptable to most of the missionaries. Thus, it never had any lasting impact on the mission.

### 5.1.3.3 Music and Processions

The MSFS readily adapted local practices involving music and processions. The people of Orissa are generally fond of processions and religious gatherings. They make it a point to take part in celebrations which they called *Jatras*. Having understood this interest of the people, the missionaries organised processions on special occasions.<sup>23</sup> A band usually accompanied the procession. The music and crowds attracted people, who came from far and wide to witness the event. Sometimes even the Hindus took part in such processions, though not out of religious convictions.

On occasions the Christians processed with the statue of our Lady, which they believed would stop cholera in some villages. Other processions were held to pray for rain or for protection from cholera and other epidemics. Sometimes the Hindus invited the procession to pass through their street.<sup>24</sup> These were some of the rare occasions when the Hindus had the chance to observe the faith of the people and to listen to the preaching of the missionaries. Some of them even came forward to receive baptism when the processions were over.

The children from the orphanage were also allowed to take part in such processions, with the hope that they would learn some of the melodies. They regularly participated in the procession on Sunday after vespers. Fr. Avrillon was especially fond of organising such processions. Though he tolerated the use of some Hindu melodies,

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<sup>21</sup> M. Domenge wrote: "Il faudra christianiser leurs fêtes et leurs coutumes, leur accorder, sans trop de restrictions, tous les divertissements que la religion ne condamne pas, quelque étranges qu'ils paraissent à nos yeux, et savoir se taire sur bien des choses jusqu'à ce qu'on ait assez d'empire sur eux pour les persuader de mieux agir. Si le missionnaire sait se faire comme l'un d'eux, vivre avec eux, prendre part à leurs joies et à leurs peines, arranger leurs querelles, les assister dans leurs besoins et les élever peu à peu à son propre niveau, en s'abaissant jusqu'à eux, sans cependant jamais s'avilir, peut-être ne sera-t-il pas impossible de voir un jour reflourir chez ces peuples quelques-unes des merveilles du Paraguay." M. DOMENGE, "Au Pays des Khondes", in *LMC* 25 (1883), p. 484.

<sup>22</sup> Descombes to J. Tissot, Surada, January 8, 1883, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>23</sup> Fr. Descombes described the solemn procession he conducted in Surada on Easter Sunday. Cf. Descombes to J. Tissot, Surada, May 8, 1883, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>24</sup> Avrillon to Msgr. Clerc, Berhampur, July 7, 1897, AMSFS 5H5-2/3.

Fr. Avrillon composed Christian verses for them and made sure that the choir sang those hymns during the processions. In order to encourage the neophytes and depending on the availability of funds, Fr. Dupont organised feasts, which included community meals. He used such occasions to give religious instructions.<sup>25</sup>

#### 5.1.3.4 Local Languages and Culture

The MSFS were the first group of Catholic missionaries who worked with the Oriya-speaking people of Orissa, and therefore it fell to them to provide some literature. Besides producing linguistic tools such as dictionaries and grammars, the missionaries tried to compose hymns using European tunes.<sup>26</sup>

Though Fr. Seigneur's proficiency in Oriya and Sanskrit was readily acknowledged by his confreres especially his skills in composing poetry, his talents are yet to be acknowledged by non-Christian Oriya scholars. *Catholic Bhagavata* was not a translation but an earnest effort to explain the mystery of Christianity in poetry. I. Soreng, who made a study of the Christian contribution to Oriya literature, states that it could not have been the composition of Fr. Seigneur. Though Fr. Seigneur was known for his understanding of Oriya and of the Hindu scriptures, it is doubtful that he could have reached such a level of composition within so short a span of time in Surada. It is possible that he instructed the Brahmin convert, Arato Misro, who, basing his composition on *Hindu Bhagavata*, may have composed the *Catholic Bhagavata*. Fr. Soreng also notes a similarity of the epic with the work of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.<sup>27</sup>

Some missionaries attempted to translate some French works into *Kui* and *Oriya*. Fr. Balmand claimed to have translated the *Rosary of Mercy* into Tamil for the use of the community in Berhampur. The Catholics who participated in the evening prayers there recited it.<sup>28</sup> Initially the missionaries were ignorant of the culture and language of the people. Therefore even the occasional references made to their superiors in France were gathered from what they read in the expedition reports of the British troops. Fr. Domenge made some references to the culture of the people in *La Mission de Vizagapatam*, but his account of the Meriah sacrifices was almost a copy of what the British authorities wrote on the infamous practice.

While Fr. J.M. Descombes was convalescing in Cuttack (1898), he used the time to translate the catechism into *Kui*. According to him, that was the first Catholic book printed in *Kui*. Since the Baptists had already published the Gospel of Mark in *Kui*, the catechism became the second book in that language.<sup>29</sup> Fr. Jules Rey was busy with the composition of Oriya Christian hymns in Dantholinghy and with the translation of the

<sup>25</sup> M. DOMENGE, *La Mission de Vizagapatam*, p. 355.

<sup>26</sup> Fr. Descombes thought that the prayers composed by the missionaries were influenced by Sanskrit, with the result that they were not understood. Cf. Descombes to Tissot, Katingia, August 9, 1888, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>27</sup> For a detailed study on *Catholic Bhagavata* see, I. SORENG, *Odishare o Odiya Sahithyare Khristodharmo* (Oriya) (Christianity in Orissa and in Oriya Literature), Berhampur 1998, pp. 324 – 340.

<sup>28</sup> Balmand to Monsignor, Berhampur, December 25, 1853, AMSFS 5H5-2/1.

<sup>29</sup> Descombes wrote: "Ce le premier livre catholique imprimé en cette langue et le second livre chrétien puisque les Baptistes avaient déjà publié une traduction Konde de l'Évangile Saint Marc." Descombes, "Informations Diverses: Vizagapatam (Hindoustan)", in *LMC* 31 (1899), pp. 555 – 556.



lives of the saints into Oriya.<sup>30</sup> Fr. Pétrus Descombes requested a press for printing books in Oriya, since the missionaries had already finished the translations of the lives of the saints, the catechism, and a small catechism used by children for their first communion. They were working on the history of the Church.<sup>31</sup> Msgr. Rossillon wrote several works on the people of Orissa.<sup>32</sup>

#### 5.1.4 Impact of the Missionaries

One can hardly separate the missionary's methods from their lives. Their simplicity and readiness to help people in need produced the most lasting impact on the Kondhs and Panos. Facing the rigours of mountain and jungle, they made of every opportunity to win people for Christ.

##### 5.1.4.1 Catechists

The MSFS readily recognised the important role played by the catechists in the founding and progress of the mission. Though they received only a small remuneration for their services, their contribution to the progress of the mission was essential.<sup>33</sup> Since the people had certain reservations about Europeans, the catechists were the chief means of contacting them.<sup>34</sup> Except for their initial contact with the people of Montacallau, the missionaries sought the help of catechists to lay the foundations of the church. In the absence of a training centre, the missionaries provided formation at the mission station itself. The catechists received guidelines and instructions in Christian teachings when they came to the mission for their monthly meetings.

The catechists were the first ones to be sent to a promising village, and they spoke with the people about the advantages listening to the missionaries. Then the missionaries visited those villages which seemed open to Christianity. Afterwards the missionaries sent the catechists again to prepare them for baptism and other sacraments. This was the general pattern in the Ganjam mission. It goes without saying that, if the missionaries had contacted the villages without the intervention of catechists, the people would have refused to meet them.<sup>35</sup> Catechists often functioned as village chiefs and interpreters and useful councillors to the priests regarding the culture and tradition of the people.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Descombes to Superior General, Surada, March 29, 1911, AMSFS 5H5-2/4.

<sup>31</sup> J. REY, *Les Missionnaires de Saint-François de Sales d'Annecy*, p. 445.

<sup>32</sup> Here are some of Msgr. Rossillon's important works: *Sous les Palmiers du Coromandel*, Chambéry 1926; *Les Drames de la Vie Indienne*, Direction du Missionnaire Indien et Libraire Saint-Paul, Chambéry et Paris, 1932; *Les Moissonneuses du Coromandel*, Direction du Missionnaire Indien et Libraire Saint-Paul, Chambéry et Paris, 1933 and a number of articles.

<sup>33</sup> When the missionaries were free or had to wait for an expedition, they concentrated on the formation of catechists. Fr. Tissot thought that without their formation it would be difficult to evangelise the poor people. Cf. Tissot to Gaidon, Yanaon, November 21, 1858, AMSFS 5H5-2/1.

<sup>34</sup> Descombes to J. Tissot, Surada, May 8, 1883, AMSFS 5H5-2/2; J. J. Vuillez to the Superior General, Ranchi, September 18, 1910, AMSFS 5H5-2/4.

<sup>35</sup> Descombes to Tissot, Katingia, August 9, 1888, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>36</sup> Dupont to Clavel, Surada, February 7, 1857, AMSFS 5H5-2/1.

However, the missionaries were unhappy with a number of catechists, as they lacked goodwill and dedication to their work. Without dedicated catechists the missionaries could not properly respond to the invitation of the people.<sup>37</sup>

#### 5.1.4.2 Hardships

The climate was harsh, and the missionaries often fell victims to malaria.<sup>38</sup> One reason why some MSFS left the mission was that they were not sufficiently prepared to live in such a feverish country. It is said, with a bit of exaggeration, that the missionaries spent half of their precious time recovering from various illnesses they contracted in the Ganjam Mountains.<sup>39</sup> 1875 was a trying time for the mission of Surada, as most of the missionaries were ill. Fr. J.M. Tissot wrote:

After the sudden death of Fr. Perissin, Fr. Muffat has fallen dangerously ill, I made him to go to Vizagapatam for treatment. Fr. Décarre who was sent to help Fr. Dupont is also down with fever. He fell ill immediately after he arrived. Fr. Souchon is also in the same condition. Their condition makes me restless. Fr. Souchon is in Surada. Fr. Décarre is in Vizagapatam. Fr. Muffat is in Surada. The Sisters who take care of the orphanage are also sick. It looks as if Surada is a hospital.<sup>40</sup>

Besides their missionary spirit, what kept the missionaries in this feverish country was their concern for both confreres and the people they ministered to. The Synod of Visakhapatnam of 1888 exhorted the missionaries to inform their superiors of the difficulties and hardships which they experienced -- even difficulties with confreres. The hope was that shared experiences might help others to imitate the good work accomplished, to avoid the mistakes committed, and to seek the counsel of experienced missionaries.<sup>41</sup>

Due to limited funds, the missionaries often postponed projects, such as the construction of village chapels. They were well aware of the difficulties of continuing their work if there was no money. They pooled the available resources in order to help the people in need. The MSFS in France and the French people responded generously to the pleas of the missionaries. Uncertain of the regularity of donations from France, the missionaries decided to acquire farmland for the support of centres like the orphanages.

Most of the Christians in the mountains in Ganjam were Kondhs and Panos. Reaching them could be difficult, as Fr. Descombes reported:

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<sup>37</sup> Descombes to the Superior General, Surada, June 6, 1906, AMSFS 5H5-2/3.

<sup>38</sup> At the death of Fr. Ambroise Muffat-Meridol on October 18, 1907, Fr. Petitjean wrote that "at the prime age fell the flower". He was 32. Fr. Henri Petitjean himself went to join Fr. Suiffet in Digby and fell victim to the dreaded mountain fever. He was 28. Fr. Julien Vulliez died on July 21, 1921. He was 45. Fr. François Fleury died on November 29, 1921. He was 39. Cf. J. REY, *Les Missionnaires de Saint-François de Sales d'Annecy*, pp. 441-442, and 447; F. Moget, *MSFS Obituary*, pp. 69, 81, 89 and 100.

<sup>39</sup> Rossillon to the Director, Visakhapatnam, February 26, 1920, AMSFS 5H5-2/5.

<sup>40</sup> Tissot to Petitjean, Nagpur, April 3, 1875, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>41</sup> Though this resolution was adopted in the Synod, there is no mention in the letters of the missionaries of how it was executed. The correspondence of the missionaries with their superiors seldom refers to it.



We have in the mission of Surada almost 3,000 Christians, scattered in about 30 villages. These are often separated by long distances, connected to each other by steep mountain paths (which are generally daredevils). Furthermore, during the monsoon, from June to November, it would be imprudent for a young missionary who is not acclimatised to the deadly climate to venture into the mountains, true abode of malaria. That leaves us with only eight months to visit the numerous catechumens and to explore the pagan villages around.<sup>42</sup>

It was not practical for the missionaries to visit the villages during certain times of the year. The decision to embrace Christianity was taken during evening meetings when the elders freely discussed the benefits and difficulties involved. If they decided to ask the missionary to visit them, they would send him a request, formally written by a teacher from the neighbouring school and properly signed by an elder.<sup>43</sup>

#### 5.1.4.3 Material Inducements and Use of Money?

One of the traditional accusations levelled against the missionaries was that they obtained conversions through the lure of money. That Christianity in India found favour among the people of lower caste, some claim, was due to the material benefits they received from the missionaries. Therefore they were 'Rice Christians' or 'Wheat Christians'. Although material inducements cannot be absolutely ruled out in all conversions, one also cannot categorically affirm that entry into and perseverance in the Christian religion was due largely to the material help converts received. Otherwise they would have defected once the material benefits ceased or were reduced. The reality is that, except for a tiny minority, most of the converts remained faithful to their new religion.

One of the consistent features of the Ganjam mission was the response of the missionaries in times of need. Whenever there was a crop failure, the missionaries were the first to extend their help. They took special care of the orphans and widows. The missionaries could expect some conversions after a crop failure.<sup>44</sup> The missionaries tried to put their limited funds to good use. Sometimes their generosity was appreciated but on other occasions an imprudent use of money could create problems.

Fr. Ambroise Muffat reported how he solemnly celebrated the first communion of the children of Dantholinghy: "After having prepared their souls, I did not forget

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<sup>42</sup> Fr. J.M. Descombes wrote: "Nous avons dans la mission de Sourada près de trois mille chrétiens disséminés dans une trentaine de villages. Ceux-ci sont situés à des distances très respectables les uns des autres et reliés entre eux par des sentiers qui ne sont généralement que de continuel casse-cou. En outre, pendant la mousson, qui dure de juin en novembre, il serait par trop imprudent pour un jeune missionnaire qui n'est point encore accoutumé à ce climat meurtrier, de s'aventurer dans les montagnes, véritables foyers de malaria. Il ne nous reste donc que huit mois pour rendre visite à nos nombreux catéchumènes et explorer les villages païens des environs." P. DESCOMBES, "Diocèse de Vizagapatam: Lettre du R.P. Petrus Descombes", in *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi* 72 (1900), p. 107.

<sup>43</sup> Fr. Descombes narrated the confidence of the Kondhs in the missionaries: "Désormais, disent-ils, nous serons à toi; tu seras notre père et nous serons tes enfants. Si tu nous frappes, tu nous frapperas; si tu nous bats, tu nous battras." *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>44</sup> Fr. Bonaventure wrote: "La failure (manque) du riz lui donne de grandes espérances de conversion. Il compte sur 200 baptêmes l'an prochain." Bonaventure to his uncle, Surada, November 19, 1881, AMSFS SH5-2/2.

their body. I bought each of them a beautiful cloth. There was distribution of sweets after the Mass. One loves them here as well. They were very happy and came with tambourines and cymbals to thank me.”<sup>45</sup>

In his article ‘*L’œuvre de Msgr. Rossillon*’, Bishop Joseph Baud commented that Fr. Payraud, who did heroic work in the Padangui and Parlakimidi areas, used to give money to the neophytes on the pretext of compensating for a day’s work on Sunday when they attended church services. In due time this became a regular practice and the people started to demand it. Once they even threatened to quit the mission if they did not get their due.<sup>46</sup> Some of village chiefs who threatened and intimidated the neophytes became friendlier after receiving presents.<sup>47</sup> Fr. Descombes claimed that in 1897, when he spent two days in Gojolibady, he noticed the misery of the people and so distributed rice after Mass. Such generosity might have solved an immediate problem and may have brought respect for the missionaries; it also created dependence on them.<sup>48</sup>

The Panos described their misery as labourers when the missionary visited them. Sometimes he not only comforted them but also gave them alms, especially to satisfy their immediate needs. In the following account, Fr. Muffat described how the missionaries gathered the people for instruction or prayers in the villages:

That evening, at sundown, the missionary and his catechist call the people for prayers. Gradually people come and form a group around them. They do it very slowly: in this country nobody is in a hurry [because one cannot be hard on them in this place]. Finally all are gathered. The priest, sitting on a stone, makes them repeat the prayers. Those who remember the prayers are rare. They will learn them again. Time and again, a goat or a pig comes to interrupt the gathering, but nobody is disturbed and the prayers continue. After 15 days of instruction, all make their confession and those who learned the instructions well receive communion. To crown the feast, the Father gives a few rupees, with which they kill an old cow for the feast of the villagers.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Jean Rey, *Les Missionnaires de Saint-François de Sales d’Annecy*, p. 440.

<sup>46</sup> Bishop Joseph Baud writes: “d’autres donnaient de l’argent à ceux qui venaient à l’église, sous prétexte de les dédommager pour le temps et le salaire perdus en assistant à la messe du Dimanche. Consequences: les vieillards moururent, et quand on commença à supprimer la ‘compensation’ en argent les soit-disants chrétiens nous quitteront en grande majorité”. Joseph Baud, *L’œuvre de Msgr. Rossillon, Vizagapatam*, May 5, 1947, AMSFS.

<sup>47</sup> Tissot to Clavel, Yanon, September 6, 1857, AMSFS 5H5-2/1.

<sup>48</sup> Descombes to Msgr. Clerc, Merycott, (no date and month) 1897, AMSFS 5H5-2/3.

<sup>49</sup> Fr. Muffat wrote: “Le soir, à la tombée de la nuit, le missionnaire et son catéchiste appellent à la prière: petit à petit, un groupe se forme autour d’eux, mais lentement, car on n’est jamais pressé en ce pays. Enfin, les voilà à peu près tous réunis. Le Père, assis sur une pierre, fait répéter les prières; ceux qui se les rappellent sont rares, eh bien! On les réapprendra. De temps en temps, une chèvre ou même un cochon vient troubler la séance, mais on ne s’inquiète pas pour si peu, et les prières vont leur train. Après quinze jours, les confessions se font et les mieux instruits communient. Pour couronner la fête, le Père donne quelques roupies; on tué un vieux bœuf bien maigre et tout le village est en liesse.” MUFFAT, “Lettre de Muffat”, in *Echos Salésiens* 1/2 (1908), p. 28; J. REY, *Les Missionnaires de Saint-François de Sales d’Annecy*, p. 441.



Though such practices fostered a friendly rapport with the people, soon it became obligatory for the missionaries to provide food whenever the people came together for a celebration. The missionaries were expected to pay for the feast. In one of his letters, Msgr. Tissot wrote that if the Kondhs were to be converted, the mission was obliged to provide them with better clothes, so that they could enter the chapel with dignity.<sup>50</sup> Despite the fact that some priests distributed money during times of need, it does not follow that the missionaries in general maintained the mission through the lure of money. The missionaries' funds were usually too limited to meet all of their own needs.

### 5.1.5 Some Negative Influences

Though they readily acknowledged the simplicity and friendliness of the Kondhs, the Missionaries were not free of feelings of superiority, which most of Europeans had in that era. They were convinced of their mission to civilise the natives and that coloured every step they took. Remarks like, 'their colour is not only black but also their souls', and 'half Negroes who live in the world of fables' represent the prejudices of the time.<sup>51</sup> Even though these comments were uttered in isolation, they were representative of the age. Although this attitude did not block the expansion of the church, it did raise some barriers between the missionaries and the Panos and Kondhs of Ganjam.

#### 5.1.5.1 Comfort of the missionaries

The missionaries had renounced all 'comforts and conveniences' for the sake of God's kingdom, yet they found it impossible to live this out literally during their stay in the mountains. Sometimes they were reluctant to go to the interior, even where there were greater possibilities for conversions.<sup>52</sup> The missionaries never travelled alone but in a caravan.<sup>53</sup> Sometimes they were carried on a palanquin or else rode on horseback. Due to the large caravan that accompanied them on their expeditions, they were seen as '*Sahibs*' or lords, and the people had a reverential fear of them. Though they claimed to eat simple meals of rice and *charu* (a Telugu word for curry) the food of the poor, they usually took along a cook and provisions for their expedition. When they were in the mountains, their servants returned to Surada to procure provisions.

## 5.2 Gangpur Mission

### 5.2.1 Causative Factors for the Growth of the Mission

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<sup>50</sup> Tissot to one of the MSFS, Surada, March 1888, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>51</sup> Gojon to Ducret, April 10, 1891, AMSFS 5H5-2/3; Gojon to Ducret, October 26, 1891, AMSFS 5H5-2/3.

<sup>52</sup> When a bullock cart was unable to reach a place or it was too difficult to obtain fruit, eggs, milk, sugar, etc. there, the missionaries normally did not start a station. Cf. Descombes to J. Tissot, Surada, December (no date), 1892, AMSFS 5H5-2/3.

<sup>53</sup> Muffat wrote: "Le lendemain, départ pour un autre village: cinque à six porteurs, chacun une boîte sur la tête, ouvrent la marche, puis le cuisinier, le catéchiste et, enfin, votre serviteur. J'oubliais une petite chèvre qui me suivit fidèlement, donnant juste assez de lait pour blanchir mon café le matin; ici tout est maigre!" J. REY, *Les Missionnaires de Saint-François de Sales d'Annecy*, p. 441.

As mentioned earlier, the Chotanagpur mission experienced a *Mouvement de la Grâce* as it spread to the neighbouring semi-independent states of Gangpur and Jashpur. Certain factors contributed to the expansion.

### 5.2.1.1 Similarity of Lives

The expansion towards Gangpur was natural for the Jesuits, particularly when they realised that the inhabitants of the state belonged to the same tribes and were even related to the people of Chotanagpur. When the people of Gangpur heard about the progress of their relatives across the border, they too wanted to avail themselves of the help of the missionaries. This prompted them to send deputations to the nearest station across the border. When the missionaries established the first station at Kesramal, they did not spend much time studying the economic and cultural conditions of the people in order to adopt a suitable missionary method. They just applied the same method that was used across the border.<sup>54</sup> Unlike some missions, where the missionaries went out looking for adherents, the Tribals in Gangpur came to the missionaries and asked them to visit their villages. The missionaries simply responded to their requests.

### 5.2.1.2 Exploitation: an Immediate Cause

The immediate cause for the mass movement among the Chotanagpur Tribals was the exploitation of the Tribals by the landlords, moneylenders and petty officials of the government -- especially the encroachment upon their tenant rights and the demand for excessive *bethbegari* (free labour). Land alienation and incessant harassment by their powerful neighbours forced them to align themselves together for protection. Since they felt helpless, they were ready to follow anyone who could liberate them from their situation. The missionaries came at the right time and were willing to champion their cause.

At the same time Tribals, who believed in spirits, were tormented by malign spirits. It was their belief that, in order to obtain peace, they had to appease the malign spirits with certain prescribed sacrifices. Fr. S. Fuchs, a leading cultural anthropologist, commented on the plight of Tribals in India in this way: "Ignorant of the true laws of nature and the cosmic order, the Tribals are strongly convinced that all happenings in the world and in their own lives are controlled by deities and spirits. Especially in times of distress, sickness and misfortune, the latter have to be invoked, propitiated and urged to bring relief."<sup>55</sup> Thus fear and helplessness in both the spiritual and material worlds forced the Tribals to seek the protection of the missionaries. They needed a superior power to liberate them from rapacious spirits and from *Dikus* (foreigners or outsiders). Christianity with its monotheistic doctrine of a loving God who is ever-ready to forgive wrongdoers was a welcome relief for them.

In those areas where oppression by the Zamindars was intense and the rapacity of the moneylenders most cruel, people were quick to accept Christianity. In their

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<sup>54</sup> M. Vermeire wrote: "In all the villages of Gangpur one hears the same complaint; burdens imposed by the police and quarrels about lands with the Raja's people. In general one may say that the people of Gangpur are the same as ours in Biru." M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Kurdeg 1904 - 1940*, vol. IV, APBS India 1 – Box 4, p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> S. FUCHS, "Priests and Magicians in Aboriginal India", in *Studia Missionalia* 22 (1973), p. 205.



conversion to Christianity, they gained not only the courage to pursue justice for themselves but also the active support of the missionaries. The influence of the European missionaries with the government was a further impetus for conversion. With their newly-found faith and backed by dedicated and competent European missionaries, the Tribals became reluctant to pay any extra or illegal taxes in support of temples, rites and ceremonies. They even threatened to expose such practices to the proper authorities.

### 5.2.1.3 Conversion as Social Change

Conversion to Catholicism meant a social change, what the Tribals called a change of *Samaj* or society. This was tantamount to losing one's identity as a tribal person. As mentioned earlier, the identity of the tribal person was woven with the society, and ostracism was a death sentence. Having realised this innate principle of tribal solidarity, Fr. Lievens and the missionaries who followed him received the people in groups and even discouraged individual conversions. Probably this was one of the reasons for the initial hesitation among the Tribals to accept Catholicism. As one of the missionaries:

What prevents the Hindus and Protestants to come over to Catholicism is just that conversion to Catholicism means a change of social status, a passage from one *Samaj* to another. So, when they get an opportunity to leave their *Samaj*, or when providence in some way or other forces them to abandon their group, they take up the Catholic faith as they had been waiting for it.<sup>56</sup>

Thus the people's hesitation to enter the church was not due to the religious demands of Catholicism but to tribal solidarity. In fact, the defections among the *Kisans* or *Berga Oraons* was a result of such solidarity. The *Kisans* had been unable to find suitable marriage partners from their tribal community within the Catholic Church. As a result, many of them left the faith.<sup>57</sup> Such solidarity required a village *Panchayat* before making a decision to call the missionary.

## 5.2.2 Mission Assistants Introduced by Fr. Lievens

In the hope of reaching out to more people and of supervising those already baptised (especially their external practice of religion, such as daily prayers and preparation for the sacraments), Fr. Lievens instituted two important offices in the Chotanagpur mission: the catechists and *the chaprasis*. The first was a traditional office in the church, while the second was typical of Chotanagpur.

### 5.2.2.1 Catechists

Catechists or *Pracharaks* were (and still are) the primary assistants of the missionaries. They acted as intermediaries between them and the people. Each catechist had his *Ilakha* or circle, which he had to supervise. Besides leading the daily prayers, he had to conduct the Sunday liturgy in those chapels where the priest was unable to come for the Mass. He presided at village meetings (especially *Panchayat*) and reported on the progress of the village when the catechists gathered for their monthly meeting or

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<sup>56</sup> Our Field 9/4 (1933) p. 89.

<sup>57</sup> In a letter dated May 3, 1920, Fr. Floor illustrated some of the possible reasons for the defections of Catholics in Gangpur. Cf. M. Vermeire, *Gangpur Mission History*, vol. I, pp. 181-184.

*Tarikh*.<sup>58</sup> They were also to instruct the *Chaprasis* on to how to conduct the Sunday prayers in the village. Concerned with the growth of Catholics in faith, they saw to it that the children went to school and prepared them for the sacraments.

### 5.2.2.2 Chaprasis

The *Chaprasis*<sup>59</sup> were secondary assistants in the Chotanagpur mission. They were, in fact, the local guardians of Christian villages. They were generally influential persons in the village who looked after its religious activities. The *Chaprasis* were placed in all the important villages. They supervised the life of the neophytes, e.g., with regard to Sunday prayers and rest. They guarded against all superstitious practices, like sacrifices and sorcery. They reported the progress of the community to the priest in charge of the village. Although it was not a full-time job, it was an effective means of establishing contact with the villagers. Even in trivial disputes a local man could more easily settle the affair, since most of the inhabitants of the village were related to each other.<sup>60</sup> By 1914 the catechists grew in number, but the mass conversions that required additional workers came to a halt, and the financial constraints of World War I forced the missionaries to put an end to role of the *Chaprasis*. Though their pay was modest, the suppression of the *Chaprasis* brought financial relief to the mission.

### 5.2.3 Educational and Socio-economic Projects

The missionaries thought that liberation from socio-economic misery would lead to conversions. But they were also aware that economic progress without education would contribute little to the development of a tribal society. However, they did not introduce anything new in Gangpur but simply repeated what had been done in Chotanagpur.<sup>61</sup>

#### 5.2.3.1 Catholic Schools

Like other Christian missions in India, the Jesuits attached great importance to the education of Catholic children, which they believed would change the face of the tribal society.<sup>62</sup> Therefore the establishment of schools was pivotal for realising such aims. Though the Jesuits followed the traditional system of education, they excelled in

<sup>58</sup> M. Vermeire, *Biru Mission History: Common Subjects*, vol. I, Part II, APBS India 1 – Box 4, p. 92.

<sup>59</sup> *Chaprasis* is a Hindi word, which means a servant or unskilled labourer who is appointed to help an officer or an influential person whenever the latter wants him.

<sup>60</sup> M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Common Subjects*, vol. I, Part II, APBS India 1 – Box 4, p. 92.

<sup>61</sup> Fr. Lievens and the pioneers in Chotanagpur adopted a method that helped them to preach the gospel as well as to protect the Tribals from land alienation and from moneylenders. The missionaries also helped the people to free themselves from the spirits. In finding a suitable method for Chotanagpur, Fr. Lievens considered “the experience of the Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic missionaries, his own experience and knowledge, the prevailing religious, social and economic conditions were all factors that helped him to determine the method he would adopt to achieve his end. This end was to win souls for Christ”. A. TIRKEY, “Evangelization among the Uraons”, in *IMR* 19/2 (1997), p. 9.

<sup>62</sup> The Jesuits had a clear objective in establishing their schools. “Our boys have many defects and our chief work is to correct these defects, - the best if not the only suitable time for their systematic correction is the time when the boys are at school, - if all the defects can not be eradicated, much can be done in a quiet way to diminish them.” Proceedings of the Conference held at Ranchi on October 17, 18, 1917, ARSI Calcut. 1005 – IX, 2.



the organisation schools. They established a network of schools that were supervised by a priest who resided at the centre. The missionaries themselves were involved in the apostolate of education, which had long-term effects in the overall development of the tribal populace. In their curriculum the Catholic schools were not different from the schools run by the state, except for the teaching of religion and morals.

The schools of Chotanagpur and Gangpur were coordinated under a diocesan Director of Schools, appointed by the Archbishop of Calcutta. The director had the following responsibilities: (1) periodic visits to the village schools; (2) checking the regularity of the teachers and examining their skills in teaching; (3) providing a uniform syllabus for all the schools in the mission, especially for catechism; and (4) conducting a central examination of the students, whose answer papers were later sent to Ranchi for evaluation.<sup>63</sup> Illustrating the work of the director, Fr. Vermeire wrote: “His [Director’s] periodical visits and checking of registers, his examination of the boys and talks with the parents, etc., show to the people of the village that some importance is attached to the work of the school, and gradually the people themselves will be more in earnest about the school of their village.”<sup>64</sup> The Daughters of the Cross were called from Chaibasa to look after the education of women in Gangpur.

#### 5.2.3.1.1 Village Schools and their Impact

The high rate of illiteracy in Gangpur urged the missionaries to establish schools even in the interior villages. Besides educating the Catholic children in the villages, the schools were expected to train the Christians in the faith. Fr. L. van Hoeck, as the Inspector of Schools, wrote:

There can, however, be no doubt that in several instances these schools have been the means of saving villages that were growing lukewarm; that in villages where one of our schools exists, some time is devoted every day to religious instruction; and the missionaries in whose districts the schools are working well, will agree that they have been a help to raise the tone of the whole Catholic Community.<sup>65</sup>

The multiplication of village schools was intended to provide education to as many children as possible, who otherwise would have to go to boarding schools, which were expensive. In order to promote education among Catholic boys in interior, the missionaries introduced scholarships for meritorious students. Some of them were taken from the village schools and were sent to central schools, where the missionaries accompanied them.<sup>66</sup> Besides giving secular lessons, the teachers were expected to

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<sup>63</sup> H. JOSSON, *Un Chef de Mission aux Indes*, p. 373.

<sup>64</sup> M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Common Subjects*, vol. I, Part II, APBS India 1 – Box 4, p. 86.

<sup>65</sup> L. VAN HOECK, *A Report on the Working of the Catholic Primary Schools in Chota Nagpore, during the year 1912*, ARSI, Beng. 4 – IX, 14, p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> The Jesuits in general accompanied some of the good students through the university. Nirmal Minz, one of the leading church leaders in Chotanagpur confirmed: “The formal schooling of children and youth in mission schools and later on in colleges and universities aided by the church has changed the social outlook of the tribal people both positively and negatively.” N. MINZ, “Transforming Effects of Christianity on the Tribals of Chotanagpur”, in P. DASH SHARMA (ed.), *The Passing Scene in Chotanagpur. Sarat Chandra Roy Commemorative Volume*, Ranchi 1980, p. 76.

impart religious education to the children. In order to pay the teachers and to maintain the school, the missionaries (wherever possible) introduced a system of local support.<sup>67</sup>

In their quest to raise the standard of the schools run by the mission, the missionaries invited all the primary school teachers for an annual gathering during which teaching methods were taught.<sup>68</sup> As in Chotanagpur, the schools were primarily meant for Catholics and others were admitted only when there was enough room. Hence they were not primarily used as a means for conversion. At the same time one cannot rule out the possibility that some non-Catholic students were influenced by the missionaries and sought baptism.<sup>69</sup>

### 5.2.3.2 The Catholic Cooperative Bank

The Catholic Cooperative Bank of Chotanagpur, the brainchild of Fr. John Baptist Hoffmann, produced positive results in Chotanagpur. Seeing its success, Fr. Sylvain Grosjean requested Msgr. Meuleman to grant permission to start one in Kesramal as well.<sup>70</sup> In his letter dated October 18, 1912, the archbishop granted the permission on condition that the money deposited would not be put to the personal use of the missionaries.<sup>71</sup> Immediately Fr. Alary wrote a charter on that of the Catholic Cooperative Bank of Chotanagpur. The objectives of the bank were: (1) “to impart to the members of the Roman Catholic Mission the moral and economic training which will in course of time enable them to constitute themselves into a system of federated autonomous cooperative credit societies with their central Bank in Ranchi and (2) to offer them the full advantages of cooperation during this period of training.”<sup>72</sup>

The British government stipulated that the permission of the raja should be sought before starting a cooperative society in any semi-independent state. Accordingly a petition

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<sup>67</sup> Fr. L. van Hoeck, who was the Diocesan Inspector of Schools and who coordinated the school apostolate in Ranchi, writes in his annual report of 1912: “Whenever possible the people, not excepting the Catholics, should be urged to contribute for the maintenance of the school either by the payment of a monthly or a yearly fee or by voluntary contributions. The amount of fees to be paid, the exceptions to be made etc., should be settled locally.” L. VAN HOECK, *A Note on Village - Schools*, ARSI, Beng. 4 – IX, 14, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. The monthly gatherings were generally held at the bungalow (a term used for the presbytery). Mahto wrote: “Refresher courses in pedagogy were arranged for eight days in a year. Every village had a school. The *Panches* tried to persuade the ignorant and truant guardians to send their words [*sic* wards] to the Schools. Failing such persuasive measures, some kind of gentle coercion too was applied at times. For the deliberate absence of the child from the school, a nominal fine was debarred from the membership of the Bank, as a result of which he was refused loans in times of need.” S. MAHTO, *Hundred Years of Christian Missions of Chotanagpur Since 1845*, Patna 1994, p. 197.

<sup>69</sup> Though exaggerated, Sahay’s claims had some foundation. He wrote: “It has been reported by some non-Christian informants, that by reading in Mission Schools, at times, the student himself feels attracted towards Christianity. Sometimes the teachers or the Christian class-fellows insisted that he become a Christian.” K.N. SAHAY, *Under the Shadow of the Cross. A Study of the Nature and Processes of Christianisation among the Uraon of Central India*, Calcutta 1976, p. 69.

<sup>70</sup> M. VERMEIRE, *Gangpur Mission History*, vol. I, p. 69.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 70.

<sup>72</sup> *Byelaws of the Chotanagpur Catholic Cooperative Credit Society Ranchi with Amendments up to 9<sup>th</sup> March 1933, Registered 17<sup>th</sup> April 1934*, APBS India 2 53/4, p.3.



to start a cooperative bank in his territory was sent to the Raja of Gangpur in 1910. But the raja did not approve the new enterprise, and so the missionaries had to run the bank with their own resources. They began it with a modest deposit, which later was increased when each member deposited the amount of 5 francs.<sup>73</sup> On November 12, 1912, Fr. Hoffmann was in Gangpur to explain the aims and the operations of the Catholic Cooperative Bank.<sup>74</sup> In 1917 the bank counted 400 members and assets of 4,000 francs. By 1920 there were 1,200 members with assets of Rs. 5,400.<sup>75</sup>

Initially the bank functioned well and enjoyed the cooperation of its members. However, it soon encountered difficulties when some of the members purposely failed to pay back the loans. Yet the bank was able to rescue some of the Tribals from the exploitation of usurious moneylenders. The bank lent money to the Tribals so that they could begin a trade, which was usually controlled by either the Hindus or the Muslims.<sup>76</sup> Membership was restricted to Catholics and catechumens. The catechumens could not avail themselves of the benefits of loans, if they failed to receive baptism.<sup>77</sup>

One of the basic reasons for the failure of the Adivasis' business ventures was their soft heart for others. They could not say no to borrowers, particularly if they happened to be close relatives – and everyone considered himself a close relative to one who was economically well off.<sup>78</sup>

### 5.2.3.3 *Nisha Sangat, the Temperance Society*

The missionaries realised that the drunkenness of Tribals was one of the root causes of their backwardness, and they tried to remedy the situation with some concrete steps. Alcoholism not only was ruining of the tribal economy but also led to the immoral behaviour of its members. Since tribal solidarity was an essential feature of their culture, the missionaries realised that an association to liberate the people from drunkenness would be acceptable. This idea led to the formation of the *Nisha Sangat*. The missionaries required subscription to *Nisha Sangat* in order to obtain membership in the cooperative societies. The missionaries understood that without any pressure the

<sup>73</sup> Alary to Superior General, Kesramal, July 14, 1917, ARSI, Calcut. 1005-XIII, 23.

<sup>74</sup> On November 12, 1912, Fr. Hoffmann addressed a few people in Kesramal on the subject of opening the bank, the school and the *Dhan Gola*, the granary. He said: "We may hope that by the end of this year our Bank shall have a legal standing in Gangpur. The Political Agent, having received a letter from the top, is to see the Raja on the subject some time towards Christmas." He suggested how the people could save money: "by drinking less, by gathering in some *Dhan* at the harvest time, from where the villages could help themselves at the sowing time". M. VERMEIRE, *Gangpur Mission History*, vol. I, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>75</sup> H. JOSSON, *La Mission du Bengal Occidental*, vol. II, p. 408.

<sup>76</sup> In order to register themselves as members each one had to pay 5 francs. Cf. Alary to Superior General, Kesramal, July 14, 1917, ARSI Calcut. 1005 – XIII, 23, 2-3.

<sup>77</sup> Concerning the membership of the cooperative bank, one of rules clearly indicates: "He must be a *bona fide* Roman Catholic, scl. Baptised or catechumen, not apostatised nor excommunicated. He must be of good character." *Bye-laws of the Chotanagpur Catholic Cooperative Credit Society Ranchi with Amendments up to 9<sup>th</sup> March 1933, Registered 17<sup>th</sup> April 1934*, APBS India 2 53/4, p. 3; S. MAHTO, *Hundred Years of Christian Missions of Chotanagpur Since 1845*, p. 199.

<sup>78</sup> H. LUTZ and R.D. MUNDA, "Tribal Change and Development in India", in P. DASH SHARMA (ed.), *The Passing Scene in Chotanagpur*, p.111.

Tribals might not adhere to the scheme. It was also felt that to forbid drinking among the Tribals would be too high a sacrifice on their part. Therefore the missionaries tolerated the use of *Hanria* or rice beer, but they warned that certain limits should not be exceeded.

*Nisha Sangat*, or Temperance Society was started in Gangpur in 1912.<sup>79</sup> Fr. Alary spent much time drafting the rules of the organisation, based on similar rules adopted in Biru (Ranchi District). Fr. Clement Beck, a veteran SVD missionary, later commented on the relevance of the Jesuit initiative: "After several meetings with the people, the Fathers convinced many of the evils of drink and persuaded them to sign a pledge abstaining from liquor. In many villages, these societies worked well."<sup>80</sup> There were two approaches: (1) those who took a simple oath for one year (*chhota karar*), the visible sign of which was a leather bracelet; and (2) those who took a solemn oath for several years, the visible sign of which was a cross tattooed on the wrist (*bara karar*).

The promise to abstain from *Daru* or country liquor was occasionally required from those applying for loans from the cooperative bank.<sup>81</sup> In spite of such stringent measures, there were some renegades. They fined those who were caught, and the proceeds of the collected fines were used for school purposes. In order to enforce the regulations regarding the prohibition of alcohol, the missionaries sought the help of *Panches* (village councillors).

However, nothing was said about the eradication of drunkenness in the *Litterae Annuae* of 1915.<sup>82</sup> The people had their way of taking to drink once they were back in the villages. The drinking habits of tribal Catholics were so widespread that their crusade against it was regularly discussed in missionary meetings between 1915 and 1925 in Ranchi.<sup>83</sup> In spite of the stringent measures proposed during such meetings, the missionaries could not completely eradicate the habit of drinking. Fr. Vermeire mentioned that in 1915, in spite of the enforcement of Temperance Society in Kesramal, alcoholism was still high among the tribal Christians of Gangpur.<sup>84</sup> The *Nisha Sangat* created an awareness of the problem among the people, but only with the undeterred cooperation of all could this longstanding evil be extirpated from tribal society.

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<sup>79</sup> Relating to the beginning of *Nisha Sangat*, Fr. Alary wrote: "Today (27.10.1912) after the Mass in Jogorpur, there was a big meeting of the men who are willing to sign the pledge of leaving *daru*, arrack, altogether, and of those who sympathise with the movement, though not yet ready to sign. This *Sangat* comprises the whole of *Girja ilakha* (the hamlets around the Church)." *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>80</sup> C. BECK, "Three Great Missionaries of Chotanagpur", in C. SRAMBICAL (ed.), *Lead me to Light. Divine Word Missionaries 1875-1975*, (1975), p. 91.

<sup>81</sup> M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Common Subjects*, vol. I, Part II, APBS India 1 – Box 4, p. 63.

<sup>82</sup> The following types of oaths were taken: (1) the oath of the *chhota karar* consisted in touching the Bible before the person received holy communion; and (2) *bara karar* was an oath taken before holy communion before the assembly with due solemnity. There were to be at least five witnesses. Cf. M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Biru Common*, vol. I, Part II, APBS India Lievens. Ser. B. Box. 4, p. 68-69.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*



#### 5.2.3.4 *Dhan Gola*, the Granary

The *Dhan Gola* or Granary<sup>85</sup> was another organization meant to enable the Tribals to become independent at the most critical time of year economically: during the monsoon and the summer, when they borrowed money from the landlords or moneylenders, who normally charged exorbitant interest. Like the cooperative bank, this organisation ran entirely on the investments of the Tribals. “The people at the time of harvest could deposit grain for safe-keeping and could draw from it when they felt the need in the difficult summer days ahead when grain was scarce.”<sup>86</sup>

It was the responsibility of the catechist to collect paddy and to store it in a common *Dhan Gola* (a storeroom). Later, at the beginning of the sowing season, it was sold at a modest price.<sup>87</sup> Each family contributed according to its ability, and the village elders (or a committee selected by the people) would later distribute the grain to those in need. At the time of the harvest, the elders collected the amount given out plus a nominal interest, which was used both for organisational expenses and for the education of children.<sup>88</sup> The people were taught to save for difficult times. However, in case of an emergency, they were advised to borrow from the community rather than from a *Sahu* or merchant.<sup>89</sup> As a rule the accounts of the *Dhan Gola* were kept with the catechist and were checked periodically by the missionary. In July 1917 there were about 26,000 kilograms of rice in the villages of Gangpur. Though modest, it was a good beginning. However the *Dhan Gola* did not succeed, since the participants failed to return the amount on time. As more members defaulted, the organisation was gradually shut down.<sup>90</sup>

Fr. Hoffmann claimed that the *Dhan Gola* required no investment from the mission, since the people provided the capital. The mission’s responsibility was to store the grain on mission property.<sup>91</sup>

#### 5.2.3.5 Response to Natural Calamities

The missionaries took every effort to be the first ones to help the victims of natural calamities. Immediately after the founding of the parish of Kesramal a famine struck Gangpur. The missionaries responded to it with charity. The archbishop made great sacrifices in order to take care of the famine-stricken people.<sup>92</sup> Added to this

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<sup>85</sup> The Rules of the *Dhan Gola* or the Granary were drafted by Fr. Floor and they were adapted for Gangpur by the same missionary. Ibid., pp. 197 - 198.

<sup>86</sup> C. BECK, “Three Great Missionaries of Chotanagpur”, p. 92.

<sup>87</sup> M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Samtoli 1904-1940*, vol. III, Section II, ARSI, Beng. 2006, p. 75.

<sup>88</sup> H. FLOOR, “The Dhan Golas (Rice-Banks) and Education”, in *The Chotanagpur Mission Letter* 2/8 (1931), pp. 179 – 181.

<sup>89</sup> M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Biru Common, Part II Common Subjects*, vol. I, APBS India Lievens. Ser. B. Box. 4, p. 70.

<sup>90</sup> Alary to Superior General, Kesramal, July 11, 1916, ARSI, Calcut. 1005-XIII, 8, 3-4.

<sup>91</sup> Hoffmann to Superior General, Bruder-Krankenhaus, Dortmund, October 6, 1919, ARSI Calcut. 1006 – I, 52.

<sup>92</sup> Fr. Vermeire commented: “That year 1908, this [Gangpur] region suffered very much from famine, but thanks to His Grace’s munificence, the missionaries were greatly helped and the poor people enabled to

tragedy was an outbreak of cholera during and after the monsoon. This was again followed by smallpox. The missionaries made use of the opportunity to practice their charity, which gained the confidence of people.<sup>93</sup>

#### 5.2.4 Enforcing Factors for the *Mouvement de la Grâce*

In their efforts to evangelise the Tribals, the missionaries made use of some of their Tribal organisations and customs. Since these organisations were operative in all the mission centres, the missionaries found it easy to animate them.

##### 5.2.4.1 *Panchayat*

*Panchayat* is one of the ancient political structures of the Tribals. It is the highest legislative, executive and judicial authority in a tribal village. All society matters were decided in the *Panchayat*, which was composed of the elders of the village, who had the authority to settle all issues except murder. The aborigines love gatherings and public discussions where one can express his opinion freely. Since the *Panchayat* had a lasting impact on the life of the aborigines, the missionaries did not want to eliminate it. Rather they adopted a similar system, naming it the *Catholic Sabha*.<sup>94</sup>

The *Catholic Sabha* did not have any legislative, executive and judicial authority. Its competence was limited to recommendations to the *Panchayat* for its execution.<sup>95</sup> Contrary to the *Unnati Samaj* of the Lutherans (GEL), the *Catholic Sabha* was purely religious and Catholic in nature. Its constitutions declared that the *Catholic Sabha* was to be guided by Catholic principles and the teaching of the magisterium -- both the universal magisterium of the Pope and the local magisterium of the bishop. Therefore, there were no appeals to the bishop's decisions. An Executive Committee was set up to prepare the agenda for the meetings, but the honorary president (who as a rule was the missionary of the village) had the power to veto unnecessary issues such as purely political issues.<sup>96</sup>

Among other things, the assembly regulated the use of rice beer during feasts and other important occasions in the village. It forbade the members from taking part in

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buy seeds. This charity produced about 2000 new catechumens for the Catholic Church among whom some 700 from Lutheranism." M. VERMEIRE, *Gangpur Mission History*, vol. I, p. 43.

<sup>93</sup> Perier to Superior General, Calcutta, March 8, 1919, ARSI Calcut. 1006 – I, 6; M. VERMEIRE, *Gangpur Mission History*, vol. I, p. 43.

<sup>94</sup> Commenting on the importance of the Catholic Sabha, Fr. Dumoulin wrote: "L'aborigène aime les réunions, les discussions publiques, où chacun a son mot à dire et peut librement exprimer son opinion: les fameux panchayats, sorte de conseil communal, sont une manifestation très ancienne de cet attrait pour les palabres, comme diraient les congolais." DUMULIN, *L'action Catholique au Chota Nagpore*, APBS India 2 – 53/2.

<sup>95</sup> Fr. Dumoulin explained: "la Catholic Sabha n'a pas de pouvoir, ni législatif, ni exécutif, ni coercitif. Elle peut tout au plus exhorter ses membres à suivre ses directives, par exemple de s'abstenir de boissons enivrantes; d'aider le missionnaire dans les villages éloignés comme catéchistes volontaires; de contribuer à la construction d'une chapelle – habitation dans des postes auxiliaires, où le missionnaire pourra venir loger un mois ou deux; d'envoyer les enfants à l'école; de célébrer avec pompe telle ou telle fête". Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.



pagan dances. It requested the *Panches* (a council of five in a village *Panchayat*) to mete out punishments to delinquents when the latter broke the law. Though the people's participation in such assemblies was high, religious issues were always left to the missionary. Though there was a *Panchayat* in all the villages, the guiding power of the Christians was always the missionary. The *Panchayati* system suffered a setback when the Zamindars settled in the village. They did not want to see the traditional village tribunal working independently of their authority.

#### 5.2.4.2 Cultural Adaptation

Right from the beginning of Chotanagpur mission, the Jesuits adopted a cautious policy regarding the adaptation of certain feasts into the liturgy. Knowing well that the tribal feasts were pivotal to tribal identity, the missionaries chose those which were very important and which could be accommodated to the Catholic faith. In christianising the tribal feasts, the missionaries insisted on using the solar calendar. This often resulted in a double celebration, as the Tribals preferred to use the lunar calendar. The Tribals loved their dances, which had a strong communal character. The tribal dances expressed their joy and happiness. They performed dances for various occasions, such as birth, marriage, harvest, etc. Accompanied by the beat of drums called *Mandar*, the Tribals sang songs of joy and happiness -- and sometimes of sorrow. Fr. Lievens and the first generation of missionaries approved the dances, if they were not performed outside their villages.<sup>97</sup>

#### 5.2.4.3 Annual Retreats

Annual retreats were an effective way to impart knowledge about Christianity. The missionaries used to gather the Christians in two groups, men and women separately, for three days at the centre.<sup>98</sup> Sometimes they were fed, but when the mission experienced financial problems, the candidates were asked to bring along some uncooked rice and lentils. Such gatherings were very helpful for the missionaries who otherwise found it difficult to go to all the villages. If they did go to the villages they often did not have enough time for spiritual activities other than the administering of sacraments. Much of the time was spent on *Panchayat*.<sup>99</sup> The missionaries also organised what they called '*Dharma Schools*', where young and old would gather together for instruction. Commenting on such schools, P. Tete observed: "Father organised *Dharma Schools* where besides intensive religious instructions and prayers, they witnessed Christian life."<sup>100</sup>

#### 5.2.4.4 Missionary Meetings

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<sup>97</sup> From the Diary of Fr. De Smet, in M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Samtoli 1904 –1940*, vol. III, APBS India 1 – Box. 4.

<sup>98</sup> Alary wrote: "Alors aussi nous assemblions, une fois par an, un certain nombre d'hommes et de femmes, pour leur donner, ce qu'on pourrait appeler une retraite. On leur rappelait les grandes vérités, on leur faisait faire une bonne confession et communion." Alary to General, Kesramal, July 14, 1917, ARSI Calcut. 1005 – XIII, 23.

<sup>99</sup> Alary to Superior General, Kesramal, July 11, 1916, ARSI, Calcut. 1005-XIII, 8.

<sup>100</sup> P. TETE, "Fr. Louis Cardon, S.J. ((1857-1946). The Founder of the Biru Mission", p. 75.

From the beginning the Chotanagpur mission organised annual missionary meetings which all missionaries were expected to attend. In these meetings the missionaries, together with the bishop and the superior regular of the Bengal Mission, evaluated their work and planned for the future.

### 5.2.5 Christianity and Social Change

The Jesuits – as well as the Fransalians – often appealed to the courts and the Zamindars in order to help the Tribals to regain their lost rights over land.<sup>101</sup> Unlike the Zamindars and usurious moneylenders, the missionaries looked at the Tribals as persons deserving dignity and respect. The mission schools, hospitals and other institutions not only provided the service but also helped their tribal converts to find meaningful employment. They became teachers, preachers, cooks, nurses, *Chaprasis* (peons) and *Malis* (gardeners).<sup>102</sup>

The missionaries also encouraged the Tribals to confide in them and to contribute towards the maintenance of their catechists and pastors, which actually helped them in the long run to be self-reliant. The traditional beliefs and customs certainly underwent a radical change -- and is still in the process of transformation. The leap from *Sarna* or sacred grove<sup>103</sup> to *Girja* or Church, from *Sal* tree to educational institutions, from traditional to modern and from old to new, necessarily involved sacrifice. The changes were sometimes painful and led to misunderstandings and misgivings about the missionaries. Only time could solve such tensions.<sup>104</sup>

Christianity acknowledged and adapted tribal structures such as the *Panchayat* and other assemblies. Hence, the Tribals did not feel that everything was totally new. However, Christianity gave them a new sense of belonging and identity. Before the arrival of the missionaries, agriculture was the only option, and it depended on rain. The more productive lands were in the hands of usurious Zamindars. Besides providing employment to the Tribals in a cooperative bank, schools, hospitals and other institutions, the missionaries promoted the idea of self-respect and the basic rights to the land.<sup>105</sup> The various welfare programmes of the missionaries developed not only the people's confidence and creativity but also their capacity to be a tribal church.

### 5.3 Negative Aspects

The missionaries were not perfect. They also had a “shadow” side, which however did not stop the spread of the gospel, even if it occasionally set up obstacles to it.

#### 5.3.1 Mixed Motives

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<sup>101</sup> N. MINZ, “Transforming Effects of Christianity on the Tribals”, p. 74.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>103</sup> *Sarna* refers to grove of Sal trees where the tribes of Chotanagpur (Munda, Kharia and Oraon) venerate their gods and their spirits. It is therefore called a sacred grove. However, in the absence of a specific term to denote the religion of these tribes, the term *Sarna religion* is used. Cf. P. BARJO, “The Religious Life of the Sarna Tribes”, in *IMR* 19/2 (1997), p. 41.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.



Not all the people who entered the church came for spiritual motives. Some became Catholics to obtain protection from oppressive elements. Others joined because their relatives were already in the church. Some entered the church because the missionaries were charitable, particularly when the Tribals and Dalits were ill and hungry. Hence, their motives were mixed. Fr. De Gryse commented: “In my opinion the *Bergas* of Latalaga are people who want to be under the protection of the *Sahib* [missionaries] and nothing more.”<sup>106</sup>

### 5.3.2 Identity as Europeans

The European identity of the missionaries was advantageous to the mission. Besides having easy access to authorities, the missionaries felt confident that government officials would be neutral, if not ardent sympathetic to missionary efforts in Orissa, and would grant their requests and be favourable toward the neophytes. Without the good services of Mr. Christian, dewan of Gangpur, it would have been difficult for the missionaries to procure a plot of land in Kesramal. He also protected them from the calumnious attacks of Zamindars and others. British officials were not against the conversion of Tribals and Dalits, but they expected the missionaries to respect the rules of public preaching (e.g., not to preach in the market as some Protestant pastors did). Neither were the British officials averse to establishing vernacular schools (e.g., Hindi schools), provided the mission did not seek grants-in-aid from the government.

To some extent, the British occupation of India helped in the planting of Christianity. However, sometimes it was also a stumbling block. For the most part, the missionaries were not aided by the British government but were quite independent of it.<sup>107</sup>

### 5.3.3 The Missionaries' View of the Catechists

One of the recurring complaints of the Catholic missionaries was the inefficiency and lack of dedication of the catechists. Though the Catholic missionaries heavily relied on the catechists in their work with the Tribals, they were not always satisfied with them. Missionaries like Fr. van Robays praised the work of the catechists, but others like Fr. De Gryse were rather tough on them. He wrote: “We work here with quite inferior material. The least one should expect from catechists is that they be somewhat honest. I am not afraid to say that with a few exceptions, my catechists are a set of drunkards and deceivers.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Berga Oraons were from Gangpur state. Cf. M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Kurdeg 1904-1940*, Vol. IV, APBS India Lievens. Ser. B. Box. 4, p. 22.

<sup>107</sup> K.S. LATOURETTE, *op. cit.*, p. 211. F. A. Plattner remarked that “one must admit that individual officials, especially in the second half of the period, helped the missionaries because of their excellent social work. They sanctioned their projects and expedited their business transactions, like the acquisition of property and so on. So on the whole one can speak of a favourable situation for the missions, but not of any actual favouritism.” F.A. PLATTNER, *The Catholic Church in India: Yesterday and Today*, St. Paul's Publications, Bombay 1964, p. 25.

<sup>108</sup> M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Biru Mission History: Kurdeg 1904-1940*, Vol. IV, APBS India Lievens. Ser. B. Box. 4, p. 22.

Initially the catechists' training was left to the missionary, who gave them instruction when he was free. In the absence of a centralised training programme, it was impossible to know the candidates well. Fr. Alary wrote: "The majority of our catechists are not masters of the situation. Therefore our results are less shining."<sup>109</sup> Interestingly enough, the diaries and reports of the missionaries are almost silent about the work of the catechists!

The following sentences of S. Neill convey the general attitude of the missionaries towards Indian Christians. He wrote:

It is plain from the records that the primary concern of almost all the missionaries was well-being of the people whom they had come to serve. But human motives are never entirely pure and unmixed. All too often the missionary held that he could judge better of the real interests of his people than they could themselves; his objectivity was blurred by a certain patronizing, and sometimes even contemptuous attitude towards men whom he could never quite persuade himself to regard as grown up.<sup>110</sup>

### 5.3.4 Christianity and Other Religions

For the Catholic missionaries there was only one true religion. Despite such absolutism, the missionaries did not spend much time attacking other religions, except for occasional remarks about the sacrifices to Thakurani and religious piety in Jagannath Puri. However, Fr. Décarre explained the necessity of constructing a church in Puri in the following words: "Is it not necessary to have a Catholic temple in front of Jagannath, the true citadel of demon in Hindustan and a monument of reparation against the horrible superstition, the idol of the which is the object?"<sup>111</sup> The *Rath Yatra* or Car festival of Puri was also an object their criticism. Perhaps more justifiably, they criticised the horrendous Meriah sacrifice and some other oppressive practices.<sup>112</sup>

But, except for a few missionaries, like Fr. Joseph Seigneur, very few of them took the trouble to learn about the Hindus of Orissa. However, Msgr. Rossillon expressed the need to need view Hinduism with openness. He said: "The system hitherto followed by many in refuting Hinduism, viz, to try to show that in Hinduism everything is wrong, irritates the cultured Hindus and it is not therefore conducive to good results. There are things in Hinduism, which are indifferent and even good and need not to be given up by Hindus when they become Christians."<sup>113</sup>

### 5.3.5 Catholics and Non-Catholic Missionaries

The Catholic missionaries competed with the Baptists in the Ganjam mission and the Gossner Evangelical Lutherans (GEL) in Gangpur. The Baptists residing in Berhampur seem to have genuinely hostile toward the MSFS in Ganjam. But except for

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<sup>109</sup> Alary to Superior General, Kesramal, July 11, 1916, ARSI, Calcut. 1005-XIII, 8.

<sup>110</sup> S. NEILL, *Colonialism and Christian Missions*, p.413.

<sup>111</sup> DÉCARRE, "Informations Diverses: Vizagapatam (Hindustan)", in *LMC* 22 (1890), p. 364.

<sup>112</sup> Descombes to Tissot, Katingia, August 9, 1888, AMSFS 5H5-2/2.

<sup>113</sup> P. ROSSILLON, *Proceedings of the Episcopal Conference of India – January 1921*, APF Rubrica, vol. 696, ff. 166-167.



the gratitude expressed at their generous contribution toward the construction of a chapel in Berhampur, no kind word about them ever came from the mouths of the Catholic missionaries. Fr. Bonaventure called them ‘the enemies of the Catholic Church’ who seemed to have obtained conversions through the lure of money.<sup>114</sup> The mentality of the era dictated that the work of the Protestants had to be combated, and Catholics were exhorted to avoid being contaminated by their doctrine.<sup>115</sup>

From the beginning there was competition among the different Christian denominations working in Gangpur and Chotanagpur. In fact it was the spread of Lutheranism in Gangpur that motivated the missionaries to expand their own efforts. The pious Jesuits of the Chotanagpur mission braved all obstacles in order to meet the needs of Catholics across the border. Discussing the vulnerability of the Catholics in Gangpur, Fr. Cardon warned that the Catholics might fall into the hands of the Lutherans, who are ‘our arch-enemies’.<sup>116</sup> In his letter to Fr. General, Fr. Alary wrote: “Before our arrival [in Gangpur], Lutherans had practically conquered the country. They had established themselves in Gangpur with schools, houses, etc. Then we could not but make rare visits. The majority of our Christians come from them. But it is impossible or near to impossible to conquer them as they are absolutely attached to their mission.”<sup>117</sup>

### 5.3.5 World War I

World War I had a devastating effect on the progress of the mission. It could not count on the reinforcements to take care of even existing stations. Even before the war began the MSFS lacked personnel. Jean Rey recorded that between 1908 and 1914 Fr. Bouvard, superior general of the MSFS, could send no more missionaries to India apart from Fr. Larrivaz and the ten scholastics who did their studies at St. Charles Seminary in Nagpur.<sup>118</sup>

World War I also devastated the mission’s finances. The missionaries were asked to cut their expenses, even if it meant they had to reduce the number of

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<sup>114</sup> E. BONAVENTURE, “Information Diverses: Vizagapatam (Hindoustan)”, in *LMC* 15 (1883) p. 183.

<sup>115</sup> Msgr. Tissot wrote: “La Sacré Congregation nous avait particulièrement recommandé ces populations encore à demi sauvages, parce que d’abord elles offrent moins d’opposition à la prédication de l’Evangile, et aussi parce que les missionnaires protestants n’avaient pas encore semé parmi eux leur zizania.” Msgr. Tissot, *Recit Succinct de l’état de la Mission de Vizagapatam. Depuis son origine, le 16 mars, jusqu’à sa division en deux Diocèses de Vizagapatam et de Nagpur le 29 juillet 1887*, Vizagapatam, April 11, 1888, APF, *Indie Orientale: Scrittura Riferite nei Congressi*, vol. 33, f. 282.

<sup>116</sup> The incident took place after or during the famine of 1907 – 1908 when the Government was seeking ways to supply seeds through the mission. Cf. M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Samtoli 1904-1940*, vol. III, APBS, India 1 – Box 4, pp. 41 – 44.

<sup>117</sup> Fr. Alary wrote: “Les Luthériens avaient pratiquement conquis le pays avant notre arrivée. Ils étaient parfaitement établis au Gangpur (maisons, écoles, etc.) alors que nous ne pouvions y faire que de rares visites. La plupart de nos chrétiens viennent de chez eux; mais impossible ou presque impossible d’attaquer ceux qui leur restent, ils sont absolument attachés à leur mission.” Alary to General, Kesramal, July 14, 1917, ARSI Calcut. 1005-XIII, 23.

<sup>118</sup> J. REY, *Les Missionnaires de Saint-François de Sales d’Annecy*, p. 447.

*Chaprasis*.<sup>119</sup> The catechumenate had to be closed, and it was not reopened until 1921.<sup>120</sup> The missionaries were forced during the war to increase local contributions. Previously the catechumens were fed during the catechumenate, but now the missionaries insisted that the catechumens bring sufficient cooked food or rice and lentils for themselves during their stay in the parish. This requirement proved useful even later.<sup>121</sup>

### 5.3.6 The Problem of Language

The MSFS had to battle with different languages, which definitely consumed quite a bit of their energy, particularly when they had to learn a language like *Kui* without an organised method. Except for a few missionaries (such as Frs. Dupont and Descombes), most remained in the Ganjam mission for a short period of time. Short assignments and frequent transfers certainly would not have encouraged the missionaries to learn the local language. In Gangpur, besides the tribal languages, the people spoke Oriya, the language of the state. Most of the people did not understand Hindi. Therefore, the missionaries found it difficult to instruct them in the faith.<sup>122</sup>

### 5.3.7 Other Shadowy Aspects of the Mission

The neophytes tended to take the European missionaries as models, and thus they were prone to adapting western customs and attitudes. This was evident in their food, clothing, use of names, manners and attitude. Though the missionaries discouraged them from adopting western dress and habits, the converts did so anyway. They probably gave the Christians a new identity and new security in Indian society. They could then boast that the 'white man' protected them, and they considered themselves superior to the rest of the villagers (that is, to non-Christians).<sup>123</sup>

Catholic missionaries also tended to tolerate the use of alcoholic drinks such as *Hanria* (rice beer) and *Kallu* (Palm wine). Though these concessions attracted Protestants, many Catholics were marked by excessive drinking.<sup>124</sup>

Finally, although the missionaries envisaged a self-reliant church in both personnel and finances, the church Orissa continued to look to the West for both.

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<sup>119</sup> M. VERMEIRE, *Biru Mission History: Common Subjects*, vol. I, Part II, APBS India 1 – Box 4, p. 84.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>121</sup> The boys and girls of the *Girja Ilakha* (church circle) were asked to gather at the parish hall for catechism classes after their meals. They were expected to continue this practice till they were ready for their First Communion. It generally lasted for a month. For the adults in the village the catechist taught them the prayers. When they were sufficiently ready, they were brought to the centre for three days of intense preparation. The people brought along their own food for the stay in the centre. Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>122</sup> J. BRESSERS, *The Chotanagpur Mission Letter 1/8 (1930)*, pp. 121 – 122.

<sup>123</sup> S. BARA, *Aboriginals and Missionaries. A Rejoinder to Verrier Elwin*, APBS India 2, General 15/9, p. 3; K.N. SAHAY, *Under the Shadow of the Cross*, p. 56.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*



#### **5.4 Conclusion**

The methods and problems discussed in this chapter should not to be taken in isolation. All the missionaries who worked in Orissa were possessed by the desire to proclaim God's love to the people. In order to realise this goal, the missionaries resorted to various methods, which they considered just and suitable for their particular situation. Though these methods to some extent produced the desired results in the Ganjam mission, they did not always promote continuity. The approaches were modified when a new missionary took charge, which often baffled the people. This lack of continuity did not destroy the mission, but it sometimes created problems.

The Belgian Jesuits in Gangpur continued to use the same methods that were operative in Chotanagpur, which produced good results. The great distances between the villages, the scarcity of personnel and the shortage of funds put limitations on their activities. However, the enthusiasm and response of the people encouraged the missionaries to face difficulties and to challenge oppressive situations.

The Belgian Jesuits of the Chotanagpur mission and the French Fransalians of the Ganjam mission were not left alone in their work. One could say that the people of Belgium and France, who contributed financially to the mission, helped to make the church in Orissa what it is today.