

# INTRODUCTION

The eastern state of Orissa has always had an important place in India's history. It is a land known for its glorious past, particularly its religious and cultural heritage. It is a land where the Emperor Ashoka renounced bloodshed and embraced Buddhism, which converted him from 'Ashoka the terrible' to 'Ashoka the merciful'. It was here that Mahatma Gandhi is said to have taken his vow of poverty. Orissa is also a land ravaged by frequent famine, starvation, illiteracy and abject poverty.<sup>1</sup> To this land of apparent contradictions came the Christian missionaries to teach the love of God and fraternity.

The Christian missionaries in Orissa launched their arduous drive to christianise a territory that proved to be fatal to the newcomers, particularly Europeans.<sup>2</sup> Their activities began following the Goomsur rebellion,<sup>3</sup> when the British troops went on an expedition to quell the rebellion, where they found the horrendous *Meriah* sacrifices and female infanticide among the Kondhs. As a rehabilitative measure, the British government sought the missionaries' help in protecting and educating the freed *Meriahs*. The Baptist missionaries responded immediately with the establishment of orphanages for orphans and *Meriahs*.<sup>4</sup> The Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales<sup>5</sup> sought a mission where the Europeans were little known and the caste practices were less in vigour. They found the place of their desire in Ganjam, particularly in the Kondh Mountains.

After the first response of the Panos at Montacallau in 1853, the Catholic missionaries began with the conversion of 'native' people. From then onwards, the Church that appeared to be an elite body or that belonged to the Europeans, Goans and *Madrasis* or the people from the South, became a Church of the poor Dalits and Tribals.

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<sup>1</sup> J. RAMANATHAN, "Orissa Background", in S.V. ALBERT (ed.), *Orissa: Church and People Groups*, Madras 1992, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Here are some of the denominations that established their stations in Orissa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: The Particular Baptists, the General Baptists, the American Freewill Baptists, the Evangelical Missionary Society and the Roman Catholic Church. Cf. D. SWARO, *The Christian Missionaries in Orissa. Their Impact on Nineteenth Century Society*, Calcutta 1990, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Unable to pay the arrears to the British by 1836, the Zamindar of Goomsur went into hiding in the Kondh mountains, where the Kondh chiefs gave him hospitality and protection.

<sup>4</sup> During the organised suppression of the Meriah sacrifice, government officers rescued many boy and girl victims from death. These children were put into the care of the Orissa Baptist mission (part of the General Baptist Missionary Society) in its 'orphan asylums' in Berhampur and Cuttack. Cf. B.M. BOAL, "The church in the Kond Hills", in VICTOR E. W. HAYWARD (ed.), *An Encounter with Animism in the Church as Christian Community. Three studies of North Indian Churches*, London 1966, p. 268; Neyret to Mermier, Visakhapatnam, September 6, 1850, in *Lettres des Missionnaires 1845 - 1857*, AMSFS 7Z/5H5; The stations established by the General Baptist Missions in the Oriya-speaking area of Madras Presidency are: Berhampur (1836), Ganjam (1840), Padri-Palli, Russellkonda (1861) and Aska (1899). Cf. D. SWARO, *The Christian Missionaries in Orissa*, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales (MSFS) are also called 'Fransalians' in India. Both MSFS and Fransalians are used in the study.

Songs and catch phrases in honour of the missionaries still echo in the jungles of Chotanagpur and in the Kondh Mountains: *Chote-mote Hoffmann duniya karal sin injot re: Chote-mote Hoffmann sahib* (Dear humble Hoffmann sahib brought light into our world, dear humble Hoffmann sahib),<sup>6</sup> and *Pitile Pito, Marile Maro*, (strike us if you wish, beat us if you wish).<sup>7</sup> These phrases expressed their confidence and willingness to submit to the guidance of the missionary, even if it meant to receive any punishment he might give in the process. This was indeed a great step for the people, who lived in freedom and in seclusion. Once they accepted the terms both the parties kept their word (e.g., the missionaries provided the protection and help and the people accepted baptism). However, the Hindu literati and the people who subjugated the Tribals and Dalits in India for centuries, view the work of the missionaries with suspicion and contempt.

Catholics in Orissa are greatly indebted to the French Fransalians and the Flemish Jesuits for their untiring zeal in establishing the kingdom of God in the remotest corners of Orissa. Ignored for centuries by their Hindu neighbours and even by the British administration, the Dalits and Tribals lived a life of contentment and happiness, though in ignorance and illiteracy.

Living in the inaccessible mountains, hence deprived of basic amenities, the Kondhs and Panos believed that their well-being depended on the good will of the spirits. Nature and the spirits, both malignant and benevolent, controlled their rhythm of life; their aim was to live in peace with everyone and to experience prosperity. Since the spirits and gods controlled their world, they believed that they had to offer sacrifices in order to appease them when they were angry. They did this in spite of their abject poverty and frequent misery.

One hundred years ago the inhabitants of Chotanagpur, that is, the Mundas, Oraons and Kharias, were abhorred by their wealthy Hindu neighbours. Adding insult to injury, their powerful neighbours often snatched away the little property that they had. They were degraded to slavery and forced to work in the fields of the landlords. They were oppressed and alienated, as their land gradually drifted into the hands of usurious Zamindars. They were reduced to the status of ‘non-people’. They were despised and cried out to God, their only hope. Their mourning was turned into joy with the arrival of a Flemish Jesuit, Fr. Constant Lievens, S.J. (1856-1893), in 1885.

In spite of a shortage of personnel and resources, Fr. Lievens, the great apostle of Chotanagpur, had an ambitious plan when he set out to convert the aborigines. Countless people waited at his *dera* or hut to have his *darshan* or vision and to get a chance to meet him in order to present their case, which probably encouraged Fr. Lievens to draft a plan and to light the fire that would go on blazing. Given the difficulties of providing personnel and resources, the idea to spread south until they met the French MSFS who were heading towards the north, appeared to be unrealistic at the time. His dream of developing a community of active and vibrant Christians in all these territories seemed impractical.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C. BECK, “Three Great Missionaries of Chotanagpur”, in C. SRAMBICAL (ed.), *Lead me to Light. Divine Word Missionaries 1875-1975*, (1975), p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> F. MOGET, *Early Days of the Visakhapatnam Mission 1846 – 1920*, Bangalore 1997, p. 251.

<sup>8</sup> Fr. Lievens’ plan was to “convert all the aboriginal tribes of Chotanagpur, then penetrate into the independent states of Sirguja, Jashpur, Udaipur, Raigarh, Gangpur and Bonai and convert all the

Under his leadership the Flemish Jesuits ‘lit the fire’ in Chotanagpur, which blazed initially in the present Jharkhand state but later it spread to the neighbouring states like a wildfire. The growth of the mission was so quick that the Belgian Province of the Society of Jesus could not provide personnel for the growing requests. At present the Catholic population of Rourkela Diocese alone counts 215,329 that constitutes 10.41% of its total population of 1,624,000.<sup>9</sup>

### **Nomenclature**

“Trends in the History of the Catholic Church in Orissa: 1850 – 1922” is an attempt to study the spread of Catholicism in Orissa. Started in the middle of the nineteenth century, Catholicism made inroads in the mountains where fever and poverty reigned supreme. Therefore, the study attempts to investigate some of the important issues such as the work of the missionaries and their methods. Hence, a clarification of some of the terms is in order.

**Orissa:** Though the word ‘Orissa’ is used generically to indicate the present eastern state of India, 19<sup>th</sup> century Orissa was geographically limited – the tract extending from the Chilka Lake to the Subarnarekha River, which administratively equalled the present civil districts of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore. The unity of Orissa was realised in only 1936, when various Oriya-speaking tracts were added to the original territory. The present area became the state of Orissa in 1949. This study is done in the hope of tracing the origins of the Catholic Church in this area. This would place the present Church in the right perspective and draw inspiration from the dedication of the missionaries and laity in establishing God’s kingdom in Orissa.

**Catholic Church:** An inter-denominational approach perhaps would have been more appropriate for fostering the unity that has begun to develop after the recent religious persecutions that claimed the lives of a few Christian missionaries in Orissa. However, considering the vastness of the topic, the study limits itself to the Catholic Church (Roman).

**Trends:** The significance of the word ‘Trend’, as explained in *The Oxford Dictionary*, guided the study: “The way something tends or bends away; the general direction, which a stream or current, a coast, mountain range, valley, stratum, etc. tends to take. The general course, tendency or drifts (of action, thought, etc.)...”<sup>10</sup> Thus, the study seeks to find the general direction that the history of the Catholic Church in Orissa took in the second part of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, when the MSFS and the Jesuits brought the gospel to the people of lower origin. In order to highlight the ‘turns’

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aboriginals in these states, making one vast Christianity of them all. This would bring us to the extreme boundary of our mission, but the plan of Father Lievens did not stop there. There our Belgian mission would link up with the mission of Central India, entrusted to the French Salesian fathers (MSFS), who would take up the work with the aboriginals beyond our borders, and the combined efforts of the two set of workers would form all the aboriginal tribes of this part of India, to the number of several millions, into one vast and compact Christianity. This was not an idle dream; this was the set of plan of Father Lievens and of his great chief, Fr. Grosjean, the superior of the Bengal mission in India.” VAN DER SCHUEREN, *The Belgian Mission of Bengal*, vol. I, Calcutta 1922, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Rourkela Diocese (Orissa, India) consists of the former feudal states of Gangpur and Bonai. But most of the Christians are from the former Gangpur State. Cf. *Annuario Pontificio per l’anno 2002*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2002, p. 509.

and ‘bends’ that this history took, the thematic presentation focuses on some leading persons who guided the course of action. Such a study is necessary for the understating of the Church, particularly when it attempts to liberate the people.

### **Reasons and Results**

The portrait of Fr. Jean Marie Dupont, MSFS (1816-1887) is printed on the cover page of the controversial work of Arun Shourie, *Christian Missionaries in India* with a crucifix in hand and surrounded by a few children, obviously from the orphanage of Surada. This work presented the missionaries as aggressors, as collaborators of the British colonial regime, as the people with vested interests in continuing the British Raj in India, and as perpetrators of violence to the culture and religions of the native population. More questions were raised on the picture than on the content of the book. This invited me to find out to what extent Fr. Dupont, or for that matter all Christian missionaries, went beyond the limits in their effort to establish the kingdom of God among the Panos, Kondhs, Oraons, Kharias and Mundas.

Two important considerations guided me in the choice of this topic: Firstly, until now the history of the Catholic Church has never been the subject of any scientific investigation. Secondly, in what way were the European missionaries, who left everything to follow the Lord and assumed India as their second home, manipulators of the ignorance and poverty of the people and opportunists of the British colonialism? Thus, I consider it appropriate for me to investigate the history of a territory where I am assigned as a missionary.

The present study is an attempt to describe the History of the Catholic Church in Orissa. The missionaries who started the Church were not aware of today’s missiological developments. Rather, they responded to the suffering of the people. In fact, they too suffered with them by sharing their condition in the remotest places. The missionaries proclaimed God’s message in a tangible way, in a way that the poor, illiterate people could understand and follow. In this, the two religious congregations (MSFS and Jesuits) left an indelible mark on the mission they served. It was not just their spontaneous and immediate response to the dehumanising conditions of the Dalits and Tribals that brought the people close to them and to the Catholic Church. It was also their presence and their willingness to contribute to the overall development of the people, which sprang from the charisms of their religious institutes that brought tens of thousands to the flock of Christ.

### **Methodology**

In the effort to make the study intelligible and scientific, the method followed is chronological, thematic and analytical. Care is taken to exclude all unnecessary details, which would deviate the reader from the flow of thought. The exposition of the work is almost totally based on archival sources, namely, the correspondence of contemporary missionaries, the reports of the vicars apostolic, bishops and religious superiors of the mission. The footnotes will supplement the basic facts with explanations and sometimes the content of the original documents when considered important. Secondary sources were

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<sup>10</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. XVIII, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 21989.

consulted only in the absence of primary sources. Published sources are used when considered necessary and authoritative.

However, this study -- as the title might suggest -- is not the mere conglomeration of chronicles that describe the activities of the missionaries. Its focal point is to situate the mission in its historical perspective and to analyse and evaluate the work of the missionaries, particularly the trends operative in bringing the people to the knowledge of truth. The study is undertaken with the fond hope that, in revealing the light and shadows of the missionaries' activities, it will reinvigorate the Church in Orissa, which is still in its infancy, and which often falls victim to the calumnious attacks of religious fanatics.

Why investigate two religious congregations with missionaries representing different nations, different peoples, and different languages? Beyond their differences was a unity of approach and dedication. The missionaries' proverbial availability and readiness to undertake even hazardous journeys to help the people were motivating factors in recognising the patterns in evangelisation in both missions.

The well-ordered Jesuit Archives (ARSI) in Rome and the Provincial Archives of the Belgian Jesuits (APBS) in Heverlée, Belgium, made the work easy for consultation. However, the other important archives, viz., the General Archives of the Missionaries of St. François de Sales, Annecy (AMSFS) and the Archives of the *Propaganda Fide* (APF) presented problems. Some of the sources in the APF, particularly between 1919 and 1922, are not available due to technical difficulties – they were not bound. Although the MSFS archives claim to follow a loose classification, the researcher is led to confusion when a document is not found in its proper place. This is primarily due to the fact that not every document is classified. Hence, there exists the possibility of misplacing it any time it is taken for consultation. Some of the letters of the missionaries who were economical by using tracing-paper on both sides or by writing both horizontally and vertically, are fragmented or have gaping holes in them. This made it difficult to decipher the message of the document. Therefore, one has no choice but to have recourse to Maurice Domenge's *La Mission du Vizagapatam* and Jean Rey's *Les Missionnaires de Saint François de Sales d'Annecy*. It is also unfortunate that the Archives of the Province of Visakhapatnam do not conserve any of the documents relating to the mission in question, nor do the Diocesan (now Archdiocesan) Archives of Visakhapatnam.

### **Limits of the Study**

Due to the vastness of the territory and the involvement of two religious congregations, both the territory and the period of study had to be limited.

**Territory:** The study restricts itself to the founding of the first stations in Ganjam and Gangpur missions. Even though Balasore is part of Orissa, the study does not include the territory for two reasons: (1) an extensive territory would not do justice to the topic; and (2) although established in 1865, Balasore remained stagnant and missionary activities were limited to orphanages and schools.

The establishment of the Catholic Church among *Savaras* in southern Orissa and *Kisans* in western Orissa, two leading tribal communities, has been excluded from this study by reason of their numbers, i.e. they are negligible.

**Period:** It was about the year 1850 when two veteran Fransalian missionaries set out to explore the possibilities of starting the mission in the Kondh Mountains (Ganjam District). Since they found a favourable situation, the mission was begun. In 1922, the

Ganjam mission was finally handed over to the Vincentians (Congregation of the Mission). Though the Gangpur mission began at a later period, i.e. 1891, the Jesuit mission reached its zenith in 1922, when Gaibira was established as a new parish, the third one in Gangpur.

The study to a large extent represents the missionary perspective, which could sometimes be apologetic and absolutist. Seldom did the missionaries highlight the defects of the mission and the missionaries, except when it was obvious and required an immediate action. Therefore, the perspective of the history is seen mostly from the missionary point of view and not from the perspective of the laity, which would have helped to verify or contest the claims of the missionaries. In the absence of documentary evidence, no consideration could be given to the viewpoint of the laity.

Although a serious effort was made to consult all the documents available for the period embraced by the study, one cannot rule out the possibility that certain documents escaped the attention of the investigator.

### **Subject Matter**

The work is divided into five chapters with two parts in each chapter: the first part dealing with the Ganjam mission and the second with Gangpur mission. Though the two missions do not coincide in their foundation – Ganjam was founded in 1850 and Gangpur in 1891, an attempt is made to group them under various themes.<sup>11</sup>

The **first chapter** seeks to elucidate certain historical and cultural factors that propose a background to this paper. A true comprehension of the Dalit and tribal problems lies in their historical background, which contains the inseparable realities of their socio-economic, socio-political and religious systems. Without this it is impossible to understand their unwillingness to depart from even an unproductive plot of land and from inaccessible mountains infested by malaria and far from all the basic amenities. The missionaries (MSFS) themselves had neither prior experience in mission work nor any specific knowledge about the people and their culture.

The **second chapter** inquires into the mass conversion and analyses the charism and work of some of the leading personalities of the mission. The general history of the Catholic Church in India provides the setting, which will be developed with the founding of the mission in Visakhapatnam and Ranchi. Even though establishing a link between the church in the Portuguese settlements in Orissa and the nineteenth-century mission is probably impossible, the establishment of different centres at some of the commercial stations is considered in order to show that Catholicism is not new to the people of Orissa.

Some of the dominant features of nineteenth-century Catholicism in India are also discussed. In taking over the Visakhapatnam mission the MSFS inherited three stations (Ganjam, Berhampur and Cuttack) that were founded by the Jesuits and later visited by the Theatines. Fr. Constant Lievens lit the fire that spread to and even went beyond the neighbouring states. The conversion *en masse* appeared like a revolution, when some of the neophytes refused to do the *bethbegari*, the forced labour and to pay the excessive tax. The missionaries considered it a ‘crisis’.

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<sup>11</sup> The years 1850 and 1891 refer to the time when the missionaries established contact with the people and when they began to receive baptism.

The **third chapter** proposes a study on the difficulties and hardships of missionaries and their efforts to establish mission stations at Surada, Koussipanga (Ganjam) and Kesramal (Gangpur). The quest to move to interior places brought them to Surada, where the MSFS established their first station. The plans to christianise Surada and its vicinity were often frustrated. Initial struggles and fear paved the way to the founding of centres in Montacallau and Koussipanga. Efforts to expand in the vicinity are considered. The missionaries did their best to obtain a strong foothold in the Kondh mountains, i.e. in Koussipanga. In spite of their efforts, the response of the people was not satisfactory. The missionaries used all the resources they had and all the methods they knew, but the result was far from being satisfactory. However, the Great Famine of Orissa in 1866 provided an opportunity to exhibit their Christian charity and forced them to remain in Orissa.

In western Orissa, the mission encountered a different obstacle. The 'crisis'<sup>12</sup> was not limited to the civil boundary of Chotanagpur but it went beyond it to inflame Gangpur. But from the beginning the mission experienced strong resistance from the feudatory chief of Gangpur. Further, the movement was controlled by the consolidation policy of Msgr. Goethals, the Archbishop of Calcutta. But the dedicated and persistent missionaries persevered until there was a change of heart.

The **fourth chapter** looks into the spread of Christianity and the foundation of some mission stations. Having strengthened Surada, the first station in Ganjam, the missionaries directed their attention to *extra muros*. They began to accept new requests and improved the existing mission. Msgr. Zaleski, the Apostolic Delegate in India, once told Msgr. Clerc, Bishop of Visakhapatnam: "If you are able to obtain the resources and men of which you are in need, your Kondh mission would become in time a small Chotanagpur (prospering mission of the Jesuits of Ranchi)."<sup>13</sup> They brought in new personnel with the intention of extending the existing stations and establishing new ones where it was suitable. Though there were variations in their approaches, they were unified under the superior of the mission. With the ever-increasing number of requests and village deputations, the missionaries had no choice but to move into the frontier to spearhead a movement of grace. How could a single mission station, situated more or less at the centre of the state, cater to the pastoral needs of about 22,252 (1914) Christians spread around an area of 2,492 square miles? The establishment of Hamirpur in the Eastern Gangpur and Gaibira in the Western Gangpur is considered.

The **fifth chapter** investigates the missionary methods of the MSFS and the Jesuits, in order to discover the lineaments and the trends of the Catholic mission. Though the traditional missionary methods (schools, hospitals, development projects, etc.) were used, they were adapted to the local needs. Since the stations were far away from the centres of the mission (Visakhapatnam and Calcutta), the missionaries were sometimes deprived of basic amenities. In some cases the mission stations in Orissa were considered to be a cursed land or a place of punishment. An attempt is also made to evaluate the outlook of the missionaries and their impact on the people. Thus, by

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<sup>12</sup> The mass movement in Chotanagpur was seen as a revolution and the missionaries were blamed for the state of affairs, particularly when the Christians refused to pay excessive taxes and to render other services to the Zamindars and others, whom the Tribals served. The Christians' self-assertion and refusal to do *bethbegari*, the forced labour, irritated the Zamindars and others.

<sup>13</sup> JEAN REY, *Les Missionnaires de Saint-François de Sales d'Annecy*, SIPE, Thonon-les-Bains 1956, p. 439.

presenting the merits and shadows of the missionaries one can get a rather clear picture, wherefrom one could draw conclusions for the future.

In the evaluation and general conclusion, issues are identified which have an impact on the present Catholic Church in Orissa. It is hoped that a return to the original spirit of the Catholic Church in Orissa would not only help the people to identify with their humble origins but would also invite today's Christians (both ordained and laity) to rededicate themselves to the service of the people.