

Christian Missionary Activities in Eastern India: A Study of The Baptists in Orissa in The 19th Century

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Abstract

The occupation of Orissa by the British in 1803 was followed by the coming of missionaries. With conversion of the people to Christianity as their motive, the General Baptist Missionary Society was established in 1822. Attempts to convert the people through preaching, tracts and education met with limited success because of various reasons like caste rigidity and extreme conservatism of the people. Impact of the missionaries was rather felt from their activities like printing, translations and journalism which were not evangelical in character. Except among some tribals who converted to Christianity and changed their outlook, lasting contribution of the Baptist Missionaries towards social progress in Orissa came directly from their non-evangelical works and indirectly from their evangelical activities.

Keywords: *Orissa, evangelization, education, caste and converts.*

Introduction

The advent of Christianity coincided with the advent of European power in Eastern India. All the European mission societies agreed in principle that colonization of India was the divine providence, and that it was the moral duty of the colonizers and spiritual commitment

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of the missionaries to civilise and Christianise the natives. The Indian people's social and religious life was considered as culturally inferior, intellectually backward and religiously superstitious (Dharmaraj 1993, p.xvi). This rationalization of social institutions was seen by the Christian missionaries as a precondition for the introduction of Christianity. The Christian missionaries and their activities thus form an important chapter in the history of Eastern India in that they constitute an institutionalized attempt at proselytization and they presented a consistent critique of the indigenous society and culture which together made up the core ideas in the discourse of orientalism. It, thus, heralded changes which went beyond their immediate purpose.

This paper is an attempt to look at the activities of the Christian missionaries in Eastern India with special reference to the Baptists in Orissa and see their impact in the society. The Baptist Missionaries were chosen as they were the first among the later or newer missionaries to come to India and the most prominent among the Protestant missionary societies to attempt proselytization in Eastern India particularly Bengal and Orissa.

Coming of Christianity in India

Christianity in India for several centuries remained almost exclusively, if not completely, confined to a small group on the Malabar Coast. The Syrian Church in Malabar is the oldest church in India which existed as early as the beginning of the Sixth century (The Imperial Gazetteer of India, p.441). It was believed to have been founded by the Apostle St.Thomas. There was no

sufficient evidence to prove it, the probability cannot be ruled out either (Ibid). The Myths, texts and songs which recount the legend of St. Thomas's exploits are still widely known in the far South. Most Malayalam versions of the traditions claim that the apostle sailed to the Malabar Coast in A.D.50, and after a period of heroic evangelizing and church building he travelled east of Mylapore, now a suburb of Madras, where he underwent his bloody and spectacular martyrdom (Bayly 1984, p.244). Whatever the literal truth may be, the legends of St.Thomas predate the arrival of the Portuguese who introduced Roman Catholicism in India.

The Portuguese first came to India when the explorer, Vasco-da-Gama, reached Calicut in 1498. With Goa conquered on 25th November, 1510, Christianity in India prospered with colonization. Various priestly orders arrived from Portugal, first the Franciscans, then the Jesuits, the Dominicans and the Augustinians. The first regular Portuguese mission of the Franciscan order arrived in 1500 A.D. Its progress was slow, and it was mainly confined to the Portuguese Settlements until the Jesuit priest Francis Xavier reached in 1542 (Imperial Gazetteer, p.442). During and following this Saint's tour-de-crusade in India, Christianity was established in those negligible areas actually dominated by the Portuguese. However, the greater part of India was not affected by it. Xavier was succeeded by other Catholics, the most famous of who was the Italian Jesuit-cum-Sanyasi, Roberto de Nobili, whose arrival at Madura in 1605 stimulated their work (Potts 1967, p.4). By 1700 there was an estimated two million Catholic Christians in India and Ceylon (Richter 1908, p.92).

The first Protestants to appear in India were Dutch and English traders. As traders, trade was their goal and unlike the Portuguese, they were not interested in spreading their faith. So, Protestant Missions began in India in the 18th century under the royal patronage of King Frederick IV of Denmark. The first Protestant missionaries Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutschau were thus sent to India and they arrived at the Danish trading port of Tranquebar on 9th July 1706. However, since the Danish trade port never crossed the boundary of the Tamil Kingdom, their missionary work was confined mainly to the Tamils (Dharmaraj 1993, p.18). With the coming of Schwartz to India in 1750, the mission was strengthened. However, the beginning of modern missionary work was started when the first group of British Baptist missionaries representing the BMS reached India. Only did the era of the Home society supported British missionary that the work in India really commenced (Renford 1987, p.169).

Beginning of Christianity in Eastern India

The Jesuits and the Secular Priests were the earliest on record to come to Bengal (Campos 1919, p.xxxvii). The Jesuits were followed by the Augustinians who first came in AD 1599 and settled in Hoogli and they gradually spread all over Bengal. However, towards the end of the eighteenth century, the activities and influence of these Roman Catholics declined as they suffered as a result of the suppression of the Jesuits by the Pope. Left largely in the hands of the Indian converts, the Roman Catholic missions exercised little influence (Ingham 1956, p.1).

The first Protestant missionary to come to Bengal was John Kiernander of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. He was previously in charge of the Cuddalore mission in 1740 but the surrender of the place to the French by the English crushed his hopes in that direction (Kaye 1850, p.87). He arrived at Calcutta in 1758, having been invited by Colonel Clive, who had seen the beneficial effects of Kiernander's labours in the Madras Presidency (Long 1848, p.9). Kiernander's labours were chiefly confined to Calcutta where he established a mission school and preached to men of all sorts and conditions. His converts were mainly from the degraded mass of Portuguese Romanism settled in the outskirts of that increasing city (Kaye op.cit., p.92). He did not do as much work among the natives. He died in 1786 and after his death it was not until 1793 that the Protestant missionaries began to work actively in Bengal.

The missionaries who started work in Bengal in 1793 belonged to the Baptist Missionary society. William Carey and Thomas arrived in Calcutta in November 1793 but it was not until seven years later that Carey along with William Ward and Joshua Marshman popularly known as 'the Serampore Trio' moved to Serampore at the invitation of the Danish Governor of Serampore, Colonel Bie. It was under the initiative of the Baptist Missionaries in Bengal that the Orissa mission was started.

Work of Christian Mission

The first and the most prominent missionary society to work in Orissa was the General Baptist Missionary Society (GBMS). The society arose in 1816 (Peggs 1846, p.149). The object of this society is "the spread of the

glorious gospel of Christ among the heathen" (Peggs 1846, *ibid*). Messrs Bampton and James Peggs, the first missionaries of GBMS embarked for India and after consultation with the senior brothers at Serampore, Orissa was selected as the site of their missionary labors (Sutton 1850, p.102). Mission stations were started in 1822. The object of the missionaries was to convert the people to Christianity. As a result, their activities were also geared towards achieving this goal. The missionaries' activities in Orissa are listed under the following headings:

Evangelization

The Baptists made an attempt to convert the people to Christianity through Preaching, distribution of tracts, forming of mission stations etc.

a) Preaching: Preaching was generally divided into three types. Firstly, the missionaries undertook regular preaching in their neighbourhood, market places, bathing ghats and other public places where they expected to meet a good number of people. Secondly, the missionaries preached by itinerating in the interior of the country. Thirdly, the missionaries made occasional preaching during religious festivals and great religious fairs.

The initial preaching of the missionaries directly undermined and severely critiqued the traditional social and religious practices. They acted and spoke against idolatry, against sati, female infanticide and human sacrifice believing that the degradation of the people was due to the 'false' religion of the Hindus and Muslims. Later on, the missionaries found that instead of attacking the religions of the Hindus and Muslims, preaching was

more effective when they stressed on the positive aspects of Christianity. Normally, the missionaries would first sing in Oriya at cross roads in order to attract the attention of the people (Marshman 1859 vol I, p.129). As soon as the necessary congregation was formed, they would start preaching. Then the missionaries would appeal to everybody present to embrace Christianity because all sinners must seek salvation through Jesus Christ only (Calcutta Christian Observer Oct.1850 Vol XI pp.456-458). The first and foremost obstacle in preaching was the language. To overcome it, all the missionaries had to learn the local language and those who worked among the tribal people learnt both Oriya and the tribal languages (Boal 1963, p.59). Like in Bengal, the caste system stood as an obstacle before the Orissa missionaries (Calcutta Christian Observer May 1868 Vol XXIV no. 284 p.342).

b) Tracts: Tracts were an important tool used by the Baptist missionaries in their evangelization. The accounts and journals in Orissa show that the converts they made were generally inspired by the tracts they distributed among the people.

c) Mission Stations: The General Baptists Missionary Society had four principal stations at Cuttack, Berhampur (Ganjam), Pipli and Sambalpur. The missionaries also established Christian settlements to rehabilitate native converts who were ostracised by their people. The settlements also aim at regrouping the converts together who were scattered here and there (Peggs 1846, p. 297). For this, the missionaries acquired land and provided them with money, seed grains etc to start with. In 1833 three Christian settlements were established in Cuttack named Christianpore, Soceitypore

and Laceyshahi (Dhall 1997, p.46). In later years some Christian villages in and around Cuttack grew up. They were located at Peytonsahi, Makarbag, Tulsipur, Stewardpatna, Sidheswar and Kesharpur (Patra 1946, pp.50-52).

Education

Education was the most important factor in the whole process of conversion (Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteer by L.S.S.O' Malley 1929, p.259). To this effect, educational institutions run by the missionaries found its establishments in Orissa in the form of Sunday schools, village schools, orphanages, English Charity schools, M.E. schools, Secondary schools, industrial training schools, medical schools, normal schools (for training teachers) and the Theological Academy. Female education was attended to by establishing a few girls school and some fundamentals of education were imparted through Zenana Associations. In the tribal regions schools were established where mostly tribal children were taught in tribal languages (Kui and Santali).

Even though the Orissa missionaries made a concerted effort to convert the people to Christianity through education, they were not very successful in this effort. A variety of reasons were attributed to it. In the first place, the extreme conservative attitude of the people was one of the main reasons. Orissa in the 19th century presented a class ridden society where Brahmins were dominant. In order to perpetuate their supremacy in the schools, they discouraged people from becoming educated (Mukherjee 1964, p.437). The Orissa missionaries also found it difficult to persuade the parents to send their children to schools as a strong

rumour was afloat that the children of these schools would be taken to Calcutta and converted to Christianity (J.C.E Orissa-Baptist Mission p.38) Hence in Orissa it was not missionary education but western education that became important at a subsequent stage.

Translation, Literature, Journalism and Printing

The first New Testament in Oriya was translated from Bengali to Oriya by the Serampore missionaries (Patra 1946, p.173). Four volumes of the Old Testament were printed between 1811 and 1815. With the introduction of the press, the missionaries made the translated work of the Bible in Oriya available to the people. Between the years 1840-1844 Rev.Sutton had translated and published the new and old testament in Oriya language (Peggs 1846, p.316).

In the realm of literature, the missionaries were “instrumental in some real pioneering which opened further vistas for the first infrastructure to be built up” (Das 1982, p.153). The missionaries through their various translations, compilation of Oriya grammar, writing and publication of textbooks, besides their initiation in prose definitely helped in the making and shaping of modern literature.

In 1831, Rev.Amos Sutton published ‘*An Introductory Grammar of the Oriya language*’ from the Serampore Missionary Press at the request of the East India Company. It was the first work of its kind. He translated this book into Oriya language entitled “*Oriya Byakaranara Upakramanika*”. In 1841, he compiled the dictionary in Oriya entitled, “*An English and Oriya Dictionary and a list of Official Terms*”. The first volume was published by the Orissa Mission Press.

Missionary efforts in encouraging the Oriya language were confined to printing of religious scriptures. These scriptures initially dominated in the realm of textbooks because until the year 1822 when schools were established by the missionaries, there were no modern schools and no text books in the true sense except for a dictionary and textbooks of inferior kind.

The Baptist missionaries were also the pioneers in starting periodicals in Orissa. The first monthly newspaper called "*Gyanarun*" was published in Oriya by the missionaries in 1849 (S. Pattnaik in *Orissa Historical Research Journal* 1961, p.71). Another monthly periodical "*Prabodh Chandrika*" was published in the year 1856. In 1861, another newspaper named "*Arunadaya*" was published by the Christian vernacular literature society, which lived for three years (Pattanayak in *Orissa History Congress* 1977, p.168). Since these journals and periodicals were based on Christian and philosophy, it received little support from the society and so they did not survive long. However, it was to the credit of the missionaries that the first newspaper was born and their publications in Oriya did encourage literary activities among the Oriyas.

The Baptist missionaries were again the protagonists of the first printing press in Orissa which was established in 1836 named "*the Orissa Mission Press*". Though the press was established with the intention of printing religious tracts in the Oriya language, in the following years the mission took up the work of printing books for government vernacular schools. By 1858, the press had printed in the twenty years since its establishment among others 31,050 volumes of educational series (Dhall 1947, p.191). Like Serampore

and Fort William College, with its voluminous publications, the Orissa Mission press at Cuttack became an important centre for the development of printing and it encouraged the development of Oriya language and literature.

Apart from translations and printing of translated Bibles, the literary activities of the Baptist missionaries in the realm of literature, journalism and printing made a lasting impact in Orissa which was not essentially evangelical in character. It helped to pave the way for the subsequent intellectual ferment among the middle classes sometimes referred to as the 'renaissance' in the 19th century.

Reactions of the people to missionary activities

Until six years of the establishment of the Orissa Mission by the G.B.M.S in 1822, there was not a single convert from the natives. At Cuttack, the missionary efforts evoked little response from the Hindus. At Puri, the missionary Bampton met with decided opposition and ridicule. Richard Temple, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal Presidency in 1874, wrote that the priestly class strongly objected to the missionaries preaching in public and charged the government with affording them encouragement by allowing it (The Missionary Herald 1868, p.78). At Arada, the zamindar ordered to impose a fine of one hundred rupees if the people gathered at a preaching place (CCO Vol VIII March 1839 pp. 144,149). Another land owner sent word to the villagers that anyone who brought a book (tract) would be fined five rupees and so the people returned the tracts (ibid. p.150). Conversions were thus achieved against the full force of Hinduism that existed in Orissa. The Missionaries in

Orissa recorded vividly the reaction of the people to their converts and their families. When the first Oriya convert, a Brahmin named Gangadhar Sarangi, was baptized in 1828, people assembled in a large number to see the baptism at the bank of the river Mahanadi. They were astonished how a Brahmin gave up all connections with his ancestral faith and accepted Jesus Christ as the Saviour (Sutton 1833, p.433).

The common observation among the people on those who became Christians remarked by Sutton was thus "we will have to become beggar if you turn to Christian". Some considered the native Christians as Pariahs or low caste people. Caste rules were vigorously applied which caused difficulty for the converts and their families. As a consequence of baptism, a Hindu lost all connection with his friends and relatives. Eating, drinking or associating in any way with a convert was prohibited. They became socially ostracised. Apart from being ostracised, no professional class would render them service, landlords refused to recognise them as tenants (Sen Gupta 1971, p.162). Persecutions of the converts were also in the forms of the barbers and midwives who refused to serve the converts (Potts 1967, p.223).

The life of the converts under these conditions therefore became very difficult which resulted in very few converts to Christianity among other reasons. Mass conversion was also absent in the Orissa Mission and converts had been won individually. There were very few or no converts from Muslims as Sutton writes, "They can listen to no authority save that of Mahomet, and after gnash their rage at our mission" (Sutton 1850, p.97). According to the census of 1872, Christians were 2314 in

number. Out of these, 403 were Europeans and Eurasians and the balance 1,911 were native Christians of the Cuttack district. It also included children who were rescued from the famine of 1865-66. If the famine orphans were excluded Christianity seems to have made negligent progress in the field of conversion.

Conclusion

The Baptist missionaries through preaching, an activity in which they were most engaged in, failed to convert many people due to many reasons like caste rigidity and extreme conservatism of the people towards the missionaries. The missionary venture for evangelization through education failed because of the extreme conservatism of the people and the general suspicion regarding missionary schools. They however introduced popular education and it was through them that modern education was started by the government in 1836 in Orissa.

The missionaries made a great and lasting contribution through literature, journalism and printing, which were not a part of their evangelical activities. They systematized languages, compiled and printed grammars, dictionaries and school textbooks which gave a tremendous impetus to literary development. They printed the first vernacular newspapers which acted as an example to its many successors and among still others, established printing press which made a hitherto unprecedented circulation of their own and other's production. Thus, they paved the way for the 'renaissance' which was essentially the outcome of the impact of western ideas on Oriya culture.

Except among a few Khond tribals who changed their social outlook due to missionary conversion, the impact of the missionaries was felt more from their non-evangelical activities than from their evangelical ones. Through literary activities, the missionaries made a lasting contribution to Orissan societies with the impetus they gave to the growth of prose and literature and through printing and journalism in which they were the pioneers. Thus, the lasting contribution of the Baptist missionaries towards social progress came directly from their non-evangelical works and indirectly from their evangelical activities.

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