

ROLE OF CATHOLIC MISSIONARIES FOR TRANSFORMATION OF DALITS LIFE IN LATE COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL SOUTHERN ODISHA

Dr. SADANANDA NAYAK

Associate Professor, Department of History, Berhampur University, Odisha, India.
Email: dr.nayak73@gmail.com

Abstract

Christianity officially entered Odisha in 1822 A.D. from the Serampore missionary Settlement with the full intention of disseminating the preaching and teaching of Jesus Christ among the people. To fulfil their aims and objectives, they have adopted various methods to reach the doorsteps of urban and rural peoples. Facing all difficulties, missionaries successfully preached and taught the Bible among the Dalits who were downtrodden in the social strata. Catholic missionaries mainly visited different parts of Southern Odisha to preach and uplift these people through developmental activities such as providing health facilities, imparting education, empowering women through SHG, etc. To establish the above theory, I must consult primary and secondary source materials available in the State Library and State Archive and various centres. The final finding may be drawn as the Catholic Missionaries were the genuine contributors to transformations of Dalit life in Southern Odisha.

Keywords: Christianity, Catholic Missionaries, Southern Odisha, Transformation, Dalits.

INTRODUCTION

The Christian missionaries had secured a license from the British authorities to work in India for the first time in the 1813 Charter Acts. In 1822, Odisha was selected as the site for missionary activities as the objective of missionaries was/is to propagate the preaching and teaching of Jesus Christ among the people to bring them to the fold of their faith. On the 7th of 1822, missionaries like William Bampton and James Pegg of the General Baptist Missionary Society of England reached Odisha at the Pattamundai Coast and preached in Berhampur. All denominations of Christianity are involved in preaching and teaching the Bible and doing social activities to transform life. The essential denominations found in Odisha are Catholicism, Protestantism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Oriental Orthodoxy and Assyrians. Catholicism is one of the denominations of Christianity, which is involved in preaching and teaching the Bible and social transformation and upliftment programmes. Southern Odisha comprises seven districts with scheduled tribes and scheduled castes, which were/are dominant populations far from modern life.

Context: Several Christian denominations are working in the World, as well as in India Odisha and South Odisha. Though they have some differences in practice and beliefs on Christianity, there are some common phenomena in preaching and teaching Christianity in the World in general and Southern Odisha in particular. Some of the denominations of Christianity entered Odisha and South Odisha in a phased manner. Roman Catholic is

one of them who entered Southern Odisha slowly and gradually spread to different parts of South Odisha. Most Dalit villages accepted Christianity in South Odisha and professed Christianity as their religion. There are so many factors behind the conversion of Dalits in South Odisha. They were and are not only the lowest in caste-ridden social order but also outcasts among the four caste groups. Touchable and non-touchable scheduled castes live in different parts of Odisha and India. Those non-touchable scheduled castes are called Dalits, which means broken, depressed, out-caste, etc. Pano, Dambo, Ghasi, Hadi, Bouri, etc., are caste-scheduled castes known as Dalits and found in Southern Odisha. Living in a different settlement where upper caste peoples were not entering and were not getting any facilities from public and private sector support for their life. Christian missionaries reached out to them and lived with them in this distressed life of Dalits. Ultimately, Dalits accepted Christianity, and this religion slowly and gradually spread all over Southern as well as the entire Odisha.

Catholic missionaries in Odisha & South Odisha: The Roman Catholic Missionaries came to Odisha from Bengal in the last part of the 16th century. Dr. Ignatius Soreng Speaks on the arrival of Catholic Jesuit missionaries to Pipili in about 1617 AD.¹ But Mr Urbaneja Vincent argues the coming of Catholics to Odisha was by Catholic Portuguese missionaries working in Pipili with the construction of the Church before ten years of Jesuit Missionaries.² In the mid of the 17th century, Pipili was affected by the flood. Hence, European Merchants shifted to Balasore for their trading, and Catholic Portuguese missionaries also constructed one Church there in 1640 AD.³

The Missionaries of St. Francis de Sales (M.S.F.S.) came to Odisha from Vishakhapatnam. Two Catholic missionaries, Father Tisut and Father Nere, visited Cuttack from M.S.F.S. and tried to establish a centre but failed due to the death of Father Sermet in 1850 after coming from the Kandhamal region. Balmond came to Berhampur in place of Father Sermet and made Berhampur his missionary activities centre. He started to visit Cuttack, Chhatrapur, and Ganjam. Aska, Rasselkunda etc from Berhampur.⁴ Father Dupont and Father Richard proceeded to Mathakhole near Suruda and established their centre there. Later on, Suruda became the centre of M.S.F.S. missionaries, and from there, they visited villages like Mothakhole, Kusipanka, and Goelbadi to preach and teach the Bible.⁵ The Roman Catholic missionaries had established their centers at several places of south Odisha like Surada in 1853, Dantalingy in 1854, Berhampur in 1855, Kattingia in 1883, Gopalpur in 1896 and Mondasoro in 1900AD.⁶ Catholic Missionary Fr. Johnmary Dupont visited Kattingia and established Mission Station there in 1883.⁷

Methods for propagation: Missionaries of all denominations used the same methodology to preach the Gospel, which was their primary work. Despite all suffering and difficulties, the missionaries never lost their hope in preaching. Preaching, teaching, and dispensing sacred Scriptures were the main methods they adopted for missionary work. Missionaries did their evangelical activities in marketplaces, festivals and places of public interest. After preaching, they distributed Scriptures and tracts.⁸ Like missionaries

of other denominations, Roman Catholic missionaries also adopted the same methods, but besides, they adopted some new techniques like fulfilling the vital requirements of life such as health service, education and eradicating social evils from the people's social life. They established several primary and secondary schools and vocational centres for boys and girls with hostel facilities. Roman Catholic Missionaries established several hospitals, dispensaries, leprosariums and disabled centres in different parts of South Odisha. Again, Catholic missionaries established Social Welfare Centers to facilitate their believers.⁹

Social upliftment activities: Education, Health Service, eradication of social evils:

I-Education: Odisha faced a great famine in 1866, where the people of Cuttack and Ganjam suffered greatly. Fr. Michel and Fr. Perison were in charge of the mission work of Cuttack and Ganjam. Most people asked Fr. Perison for support, and Fr. Perison got an opportunity to propagate the Teachings and preaching of Jesus Christ while he was giving help to the people. Most of the children became orphans due to the great famine, and Fr. Perison supported these children and finally baptized more than 300 children.¹⁰ The Missionaries constructed two Orphan centres at Suruda to nurture these children to be good Christians. Even to settle down young Christians after marriage, they built up two Christian villages at Dantaling and Karikote. With the request of Missionaries to run these orphan centres, the British Government provided financial assistance to each child with Rs.2.50 monthly. Even new couples were given Rs.20/- financial support for their maintainance.¹¹

Table-I

Year	Boys	Girls	Total	Grants
April, 1870	77	94	171	427.50
June, 1871	75	93	168	420.00
July, 1872	69	92	161	402.50
June, 1873	70	90	160	400.00

The Missionaries were taking all-round care of these children for their development. They had established one school there for their education, which got a government grant in 1895 AD.

People were ignorant, illiterate and socially backward. There was caste discrimination, conflict among the people for land and land tax were the significant issues for which the area was not in peaceful progress. Fr. Johnmary Dupont came to Suruda after Fr. Gweelermin. Fr. Dupont had known that only preaching couldn't bring changes in the lives of people, but other issues to be taken seriously. Hence, Fr. Dupont had taken the issues to solve conflicts among the people on the ground of land. He convinced people to adopt a middle path to solve land problems. He taught the people that caste rigidity is a great sin. He propagated against the caste system. He has given more importance to living a peaceful life in society among all people. This kind of attitude of Fr. Dupont attracted the Raja (King) of Kattingia to meet Fr. Dupont and Kandhas to solve their problems.¹² Fr. Dupont solved people's problems through mutual understanding and provided health care

services to these people. They started to believe in medicine rather than their nature, Gods and Goddesses.

Table-II

SI No	Educational Institution	Berhampur Catholic Diocese	Cuttack-Bhubaneswar Diocese	Total
1	High Schools	04	03	07
2	M.E. School	06	04	10
3	U.P. School	05	03	08
4	Hostels Boys & Girls	35	21	56

The Catholic Missionaries ran several educational institutions in Southern Odisha where Catholic boys and girls got facilities to study up to High school education. There are 56 hostels for boys and girls from upper Primary to High school students where Catholic Christian boys and girls stay to build up their initial education career before joining higher educational institutions. Six Catholic Christian villages in three districts, Gaja, Patti Kan, Dhhamal, and Rayagada, were taken as the sample survey about the educational status of Catholic Christians, and it found that each village did not have any children without schools. Twenty people from each village between 20 and 40 were taken for a survey, which found that all had a minimum high school education. Missionary education was not confined to the Christians only but for all. Missionaries tried to develop education in Southern Odisha, establishing a centre at Berhampur. Even they opened schools amongst the kui-speaking people of Southern Odisha.

The missionaries established Sunday schools, Village Schools, Orphanages, English Charity Schools, M.E. Schools, Secondary Schools, Industrial Training Schools, Medical Schools, Normal Schools and the Theological Academy. Even girls' schools and Zenana Associations were opened in the tribal belts and taught in the tribal languages. 13 Those people educated in Christian-run schools were given input about socially evil practices, rites and ritual systems that prevailed in their faiths and beliefs. These practices could not support improving social status and salvation in life. Instead, these are the factors for dehumanization. The missionaries' role is to educate, preach, and teach the Bible and provide services to the people of southern Odisha.

II-Health Service: There is a famous saying that “health is wealth”, but this idea was not completely working in various remote areas of Odisha. People belonging to Scheduled tribes and scheduled castes were /are living in the hill areas where there is no good communication, as well as no safe drinking water, medicine, and no doctors. The lives of people living in the forest/hills areas are unsuitable even after 75 years of Indian independence. They used rites and rituals with the support of Priest/ Pujari/Jani for quick recovery of health, the utterances of mantras (healing prayers) to get good health back, and giving a sacrifice of animals to their Gods and Goddesses for recovery of health. They were suffering from different diseases like malaria, chicken pox, smallpox, tuberculosis, etc., which led to death. In these critical situations, missionaries of different denominations reached different parts of Southern Odisha to propagate Christianity.

Though Christian missionaries intended to propagate Christianity among the tribal and non-tribal for the spread of messages of Christ to fulfil the above aim, missionaries started to render health services to the needy to save their lives.

Table-III

SI No	Health Centers	Berhampur Catholic Dioceses	Cuttack-Bhubaneswar Diocese	Total
1	Catholic Hospitals	02	02	04
2	Catholic Dispensaries	26	18	44
3	Catholic Leprosarium	03	05	08

Health service is one of the methods to reach near to the people of Southern Odisha. The Catholic Missionaries provided health services to the needy people who were not getting medical facilities. The above table explains the Catholic missionaries' establishment of hospitals, dispensaries and leprosariums in Southern Odisha.¹⁴ In these health centres, missionary doctors, nurses, and health care persons rendered health services to all community patients with medicine and health care. The above table also shows that the dispensaries are taking a greater role in providing health care to Catholic Christians, particularly and all communities in general. This information is extracted from records of patients of Dispensaries.¹⁵ Interview was taken physically and over the telephone with 20 peoples in each remote village of the Gajapati and Kandhamal districts regarding health services rendered by the catholic dispensaries. From this interview, it is extracted that poor Dalit people have more financial conditions to take modern medical support from urban areas run by public and private sectors. They depend entirely on these dispensaries for their health issues. Missionaries also motivated and educated poor Dalit people to take medicines and not believe in rituals and mantras. The missionaries became successful in preaching and teaching Christianity among the Dalits of Southern Odisha by rendering education and health services and attempting to remove social evils in the Dalit social life.

III-Eradication of Social evils: Among all the methods adopted by Christian missionaries for preaching and teaching the Bible, Roman Catholic missionaries also adopted the same way to preach and teach Christianity among people. People were practising some evil social systems when missionaries entered Southern Odisha. Roman Catholic Christian missionaries or Catholic Christian Missionaries came to Southern Odisha for the propagation of Christianity among the peoples of this region. The Christian society that developed in Christian villages of different parts of South Odisha did not observe casteism. The evils of a caste-ridden society familiar to Hindus were absent in these villages.¹⁶ Dalits believed in fate for their socially diminished status; they were taking support of mantra and tantra (Healing prayer and magic) for quick recovery of health, denying modern allopathic medicines. Catholic Christian missionaries rejected it and gave input to Dalits to adopt modern means of lifestyle.

CONCLUSION & FINDINGS

Catholic Christian Missionaries not only propagated Christianity amongst Dalis of Southern Odisha but also attempted to promote education and improve Dalits' health care. Their aim was to preach and teach the Bible, but they also rendered social services to eradicate social evils. They intended to make Dalits human beings by providing education and health services and eradicating all social evil practised in their society. Catholic Christian Missionaries make a little bit to transform Dalit's Social and religious life.

References & Notes

- 1) Dr. Ignatius Soreng, *Odishare O Odiya Sahityare Khista Dharma* (Odia Book), Deepti Prasarini, Bermapur, 1998, p.64
- 2) Urbaneja Vincent, *History of Christianity in Orissa (Unpublished)*, Vol.I, Madrid, 1988,p.10
- 3) J.J.Compos, *History of Portuguese in Bengal*, Medical Publishers, London,1919,p.105
- 4) Domege RP, *La Mission de Vizagapatam*, Parun Missionary de saint Francois de Sales, Annecy,1890,pp.187-188
- 5) Urbaneja Vincent, *History of Christianity in Orissa (Unpublished)*, Vol.I, Madrid, 1988,p.86
- 6) Stephen Neill, *The Story of Christian Church in India and Pakistan*, Madras, 1972, p.115
- 7) Fr. Thomas Cherukat, MSFS, *Kattingia Dharmanchalara Shatabarshika*, 1983, p.17
- 8) Dasarathi Swaro, *The Christian Missionaries in Orissa-their Impact on Nineteenth Century Society*, Calcutta,1990,p.12
- 9) *The Catholic Directory of Orissa*, Published by The Orissa Regional Commission for Social Communications, Arnold Vikash Sanchar, Jharsuguda, August,2002, p.09
- 10) Urbaneja Vincent, *History of Christianity in Orissa (Unpublished)*, Vol.I, Madrid, 1988,p.90
- 11) Urbaneja Vincent, *History of Christianity in Orissa (Unpublished)*, Vol.I, Madrid, 1988,pp.90-91
- 12) Rey Jean P, *Les Missionaries de saint Francois de Sales D'Annecy*, S.I.P.E,1956,p.255
- 13) Manjusri Dhall, *The British Rule-Missionary Activities in Orissa (1822-1947)*, New Delhi, 1997, pp.152-153
- 14) *The Catholic Directory of Orissa*, Published by The Orissa Regional Commission for Social Communications, Arnold Vikash Sanchar, Jharsuguda, August,2002, p.09
- 15) Dispensary Patient Record Registers of 2022-2023, Catholic Convent Dispensary, Bamunigam, kandhamal, Pp.13-23
- 16) Dasarathi Swaro, *The Christian Missionaries in Orissa-their Impact on Nineteenth Century Society*, Calcutta,1990,p.47