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The British administration and the protestant mission in Chota Nagpur 1850-1900

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Abstract

The tribals were very simple people who were easily duped by middlemen and other foreign settlers of their land and property, because of their extreme poverty and backwardness. The coming of the Christian missionaries acted as a catalyst for them as they began to fight for their rights. This was possible because the missionaries strove to learn their language and then began to educate them about their rights and the need to fight and preserve what belonged rightfully to them. They awakened in the tribal leadership qualities as seen in the case of Birsa Munda. This paper explores the problems of the tribal people and the impact that the Christian teachings of the missionaries had on the life of the Mundas.

Keywords: Literacy, messianic movement, nationalism, Birsa Munda

Introduction

Long before the term nationalism came into vogue, people from time immemorial have been attached to their kin, culture and tradition, to their homeland and local territorial authorities. The tribals are called the ‘sons of the soil’ or ‘*Bhumijans*’ as they are attached to the land, just like the serf of medieval times. They were superstitious, polytheistic, worshippers of nature. This paper aims to highlight the fight of the tribals to secure their land rights and the different groups - especially the Christian missionaries - they encountered in the course of that struggle and the impact of Birsa Munda’s Ulgulan on the people and administration.

Socio – economic conditions 1850 - 1900

During the colonial rule, interaction with the tribal was confined to commercial activities with the later assuming the sub-ordinate role of poor tenants or share-croppers, producing crops for the markets rather than for their own subsistence. Primary education came under the purview of the local landlords who took “pride in setting up schools on their estates but were careful not to encourage too much literacy” among the subaltern. High class tenants were unwilling to serve among the remote areas and qualified tribal, if any, were not interested in promoting education at all.

Between 1850 and 1900 India was plagued by nearly twenty-four major famines resulting in the death of millions of individuals. Though the government adopted various relief measures they proved to be ineffective. A “Famine Relief and Insurance Fund “was set up with fifteen million rupees every year (Majumdar *et al.* 861) ^[12]. The government spent large amounts of money for relief work and were generously supported by contributions from Christian charities, both in India and abroad. Ironically, the government never supported the missionaries in their medical missions and the lack of funds during the economic depressions caused many missions to close down. (David 95)

Exploitation at the hands of Middle-men

The Mundas and Oraons are the earliest known settlers of Chota Nagpur. Their descendants are known as the Khuntkattidars. They initially migrated to the Chotanagpur area in the 1st Century AD (Roy 130) and were said to have their own secular and religious head and their own system of administration called *parha*. The Mundas were a major tribe and over the years, a foster son of a Munda – Phani Mukut Roy – emerged as the hereditary ruler over the Munda – Oraon areas. The voluntary gifts of grain and seasonal jungle produce presented to the king soon became fixed tributes and he even levied a certain rent from the villages but

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the tribals were reluctant to oblige. The king soon adopted Hindu customs and traditions and invited other Hindus to settle in his lands. Foreign nobles and courtiers were granted village over-lordship in return for services and a percentage of profits from the land. These newly invested *jagirdars* soon came into conflict with the *khuntkattidars* or original founders of the villages and clearers of the forest, as they tried to force the tribal s to give rent in cash and kind, and their efforts were resisted. The successive kings invited outsiders of different ethnic groups to force the tribal into submission and to increase their clout in the country-side. This led to agrarian troubles as some *jagirdars*, discontent with small tributes went ahead and appropriated lands of the tribals and found new ways of exploiting them, for eg., charging enhanced rents, illegal exactions and withholding of receipts.

Though Chota Nagpur came under British control in 1765 and effective administration was started in 1834 (Ekka 396). Miscommunication enhanced the exploitation of the tribals at the hands of the jagirdars. As the British officials were misinformed about the affairs of the tribal lands and their original dwellers, wherever they rose in rebellion they were presented as “lawless savages and unscrupulous dacoits” by the jagirdars and so they were suppressed ruthlessly by the administration (Cuthbert 363 – 364). The immigrant landlords or *dikus* took advantage of the new set up to obtain ex-partee decrees to legalise their proprietary rights over the Munda and Oraon ancestral lands. In 1831-1832, the Mundas rose against the outsiders - Pathans, Muslims and Sikh. The British administration looked into the matter and in 1834 the administration was shifted to Chotanagpur plateau and a *jamindari* police and court of justice was established. In 1854, the administration came under a commissioner and regular civil, criminal and revenue courts were established. Unfortunately these courts unintentionally aided the *dikus* and helped them in destroying the rights of the *khuntkattidars* (Reid 81 -83). The “holders of land” were reduced to “holders of plough” (Roy 219 – 226). The police soon joined hands with the *dikus* in their demand for *begari* (wageless labour). Thus exploitation of the tribals increased to great heights before the advent of the Christian missionaries. They yearned for a leader who would fight for them and take away their misery. They were ready to follow anyone and do anything that would obtain relief.

Christian missionaries and literacy

The early Christian missionaries were the first to explore the areas inhabited by these people, learn their language and publish standard dictionaries, grammar and anthologies. They also taught the tribal the language of the masses. This led to the printing of tribal folk-literature which provides us with a plethora of information about the beliefs, customs and traditions of the tribal community, which was earlier passed down through oral tradition. Dr. Notrott learnt the Mundari language and translate the New Testament in Mundari, which was published in the jubilee of the Gossner Mission in Chotanagpur in 1895(Canton 97) and later the entire Bible in 1913. Fr. Hahn ministered to the Oraons at Lohardaga, 70 kms west of Ranchi. He learnt their language Kudux and wrote grammar and folklore and translated Luther's Catechism and the Gospel. Among the other missionaries who have laboured over language and left immense resources at our disposal are J. B. Hoffman and A. V. Emlen, who co-authored the fifteen volumes of

Encyclopaedia Mundarica. The missionaries opened schools and hospitals to cater to the needs of the tribals too.

The Gossner Mission at Chota Nagpur

In 1844, three young men and a pastor from Germany were sent out by Father Johannes Evangelista Gossner of Berlin, to minister to work among the Karen, who had killed a German merchant some years ago. Since the political situation in Burma was unfavourable they stayed back at Calcutta. They entered Chota Nagpur in 1845, at the behest of Commissioner of Chotanagpur, Captain Harrington, who had requested the Mr. Haeberlin, secretary of the Calcutta Auxiliary of the British and Foreign Bible Society, to them to be sent to preach the gospel (GELC, 1). Four German missionaries of the Gossner Mission society - Rev. Emile Schatz, Fredrik Batsch, August Brant and Theodore Janke - arrived at Ranchi on November 2nd, 1845, and began preaching the Gospel in Hindi (Minz, 22)

For four years they laboured in vain. Then, in 1849, four Oraon tribals – Nabin, Ghuran, Keso and Bandhu – after making careful enquiries about Christianity sought to be baptised on June 9th, 1850. They were seeking the truth and were convinced only after they saw a vision of Jesus Christ while praying (Minz, 23). Two years later, on October 25th, 1851, two Mundas – Sadho and Mangta – were baptised. The foundations of the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church were laid on November 18th, 1851, and it was dedicated on December 24th, 1855 (GELC, 1). The spiritual need of the Mundas was greater than their material need and “...the Mundas and Uraons, like other Indian tribals in the mid nineteenth century, craved spiritual solace.”(Bara 206). Then came the revolt of 1857 which shook the foundations of the British Empire. The missionaries left Ranchi “on August 1st, 1857, leaving behind them 10.000 baptised Christians living in 56 villages.” (GELC, 2). They left an Oraon Navin Doman (Tirkey) to take care of the converts. Inspite of the widespread violence and opposition, the new Christians did not succumb to the pressures of their oppressors and remained faithful. Navin became the father of faith for the Christians in Jharkhand as he organized a congregation in his village, started a school and appointed elder of his congregation in his village. “It is to the credit of the Christians that inspite of severe persecution none of them renounced their new faith” (2). This was the first step taken by the new Christians in standing up against their exploiters.

The second batch of missionaries who came after the mutiny subsided, were Dr. Alfred Notrott and Fr. Ferdinand Hahn. Dr Notrott, who laboured tirelessly among the Mundas at Chaibasa, Bhuyri and Govindpur (Minz, 396). The land issue soon became an integral part of witnessing for the missionaries and the tribal Christian was becoming more organised. Land cases brought by an Oraon Christian, supported by the missionaries were more successful than those brought by the *sarna* or non-Christian tribal. Hence the impression that “the religion of the Cross” (Roy 145) was helping shake off the yoke of the oppressors. This resulted in the addition of a great number of nominal Christians to the Church (Lakra 48-49, Reid 34 – 35).

During the 1870s, another agrarian revolt was fomented by the tribal chiefs who attacked the imposition of beth begari or forced labour. But on the advice of Christian Missionaries (Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic) the Mundas tried a constitutional approach to regain their lost rights (Ekka,

396). This 'Sardari Larai' shook the Church. But the British Government rejected the legal petitions of the Sardars (Christian leader among the tribal) asking for an inquiry into the problem of land alienation and its return to its rightful owners. The 'dikus' or immigrant landlords were recognized as the owners of the tribal lands.

"The revolutionaries fighting for their agrarian rights (among them were many Christians) wanted the mission to support and sustain their struggle. The government did not countenance mission's support to the agrarian revolution. The mission, thereafter, withdrew support to the Sardars which shocked them and a large number of defections followed" (GLEC, 3).

Birsa Munda and the Great Tumult

The Mundas once again rose in armed rebellion under the leadership of Birsa Munda, who was considered by the Mundas as "Dharti Baba" (or land father). The rebellion under Birsa Munda in 1899-1900 came to be known as Ulgulan or Great Tumult (Sarkar, 46).

Birsa's father Sugna, his uncle Barakanu Paul and younger brother had accepted Christianity when they came in contact with the German Gossner Mission. According to the account of Bharmi Munda and the Gossner Mission, Birsa was born in July 1872, and baptised on March 7, 1886 as Birsa David, which he later changed to Daud. During his formative years, he received some education from the missionaries (47). Disillusioned by the inadequacy of Sardars to fight for their land rights, made Birsa leave the Christian mission and join the Catholic mission in 1890 hoping to achieve victory with their help, but in vain. The Christian religion greatly influenced his character and in his fight for land alienation he was forced to leave school. Soon he came under the influence of the Vaishnava sect, which also had a great impact on him. Between 1893 and 1894, he participated in a movement preventing the Forest Department from taking over village wastelands (47).

In 1895, he claimed to have seen a vision of a supreme God, after which he was endowed with miraculous healing powers, which earned him the title of "Birsa Bhagwan" (47). He effectively won over the Christian Mundas who saw him as a prophet of a single God. He gained many followers as he appealed to their senses as a 'charismatic leader' (Fuchs, p28). Thousands flocked to hear his prophecy, while the Sardars induced agrarian and political overtones into the initially religious movement. Fearing a conspiracy, the administration jailed Birsa from 1895 to 1897 but he returned with renewed vigour.

In February 1898, Birsa gave his followers two tactical options to choose from in wrestling for the Munda kingdom - either the "religious" or the "forcible" option. The latter seemed more appealing to the followers but it led to a disastrous defeat (Singh 82-83). A series of nightly meetings were held during 1898 – 1899, in which Birsa urged his followers to kill the Thikadars, Jagirdars, Rajas, Hakims and Christians and promised "the guns and bullets would turn to water" (Sarkar, 47). This announcement would have definitely increased his stature as a leader because he was asking his people to rebel against established authority. The termination of the bad present was ritually enacted at some of the large gatherings of his people on the eve of Ulgulan (Guha, 296).

On December 24th, 1899, the followers of Birsa – Birsaites - shot arrows and tried to burn down churches in the districts of Ranchi and Singhbhum (Sarkar 47). The police themselves soon became the main targets leading to panic in

Ranchi. On January 9th, 1900, the Birsaites were defeated at Sail Rakab Hill and Birsa was captured and imprisoned. He died on June 9th, 1900, in prison while nearly 350 Birsaites were put on trial, three were hanged and forty-four deported (47).

The government then ordered a definite survey of the land and settlement of the country to be made. A Jesuit missionary, J. B. Hoffmann was asked by the British to draft the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, which prohibited further alienation of the Munda ancestral lands. But by then nearly 9/10th of the Khuntkatti lands had passed on to the dikus or aliens (Ekka, p396) However, the survey and settlement operations carried out between 1902 and 1910 and the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 did provide a recognition of the Khunkatti rights and it banned beth begari.

Birsa Munda and the Messianic movement

Birsa Munda's movement has the trappings of a messianic movement (Fuchs p28) for several reasons, namely: there was a clash of more than one culture and religion as the Munda kings had adopted Hindu customs and traditions, allowed moneylenders from neighbouring kingdoms to collect rent, thereby creating an atmosphere of oppression; the coming of the missionaries brought the aborigines with touch with another world altogether; then came the British administration; the aborigines had been an intensely dissatisfied lot due to the exploitation of their land and resources by the dikus. Birsa vehemently rejected the authority of the dikus and termed all outsiders - dikus, British and Christian missionaries - as enemies of the people. He is looked upon by his people, as a prophet who will usher in a new era and large crowds gather to have a darshan of Birsa Bhagwan Chaudhari 9).

When Chotanagpur came under the British rule, the problem of land alienation and forced labour did not end, nor did the British take any interest in solving the problem. The Christian missionaries did advocate the use of legal means to fight the injustice in the Sardari Larai but had to back out when the government frowned upon their support. It was at this time that Birsa Munda came forth as a charismatic leader. There are two distinct phases in his movement: the first phase is from June 1894 – July 1895, and, the second is from December 1899 – October 1900. In the first phases it looks like a political movement with smatterings of a religious movement. He claimed to have seen God and the people believed in his 'vision' and prediction of the coming of a 'deluge' which would destroy everything, 'would sweep away government' and obliterate all the old institutions (Singh 8) and bring a change. Biblical teachings and Munda creation myths deeply influenced this prophecy. He believed that the British Raj could only be overthrown by the use of force (Chaudhari 19). At this point of time, it was not an organised movement, though Birsa was unwavering in his intentions.

The second phase witnessed a change from the first by the presence of an elaborate organisation. The followers were divided into three groups: Puranakas, Pracharakas, and Nanakas (Chaudhari 9). The Puranakas or ancients, were loyalists, hand-picked and closest to Birsa. They were party to the decision making processes in the 'nocturnal meetings' held in Birsa's presence. Pracharakas, or preachers propagated Birsa's messages relating to religious revitalization. Nanakas, or 'new members'; including recent recruits, 'were armed as well as the others but they were not

party to any resolutions and important decisions were handed down to them. His leadership was furthered boosted by the addition of the Sardari Larai leaders into his movement. The other factors affecting the movement were the famines of 1896 – 1897 and the famine of 1899 – 1900 and the outbreak of the cholera epidemic, which eventually took his life. The tribals believed that natural disasters were ominous and Birsa's predictions seemed to be coming true. They hoped to recover their 'lost kingdom' and a time when there would be 'enough to eat, no famine, the people will live together in love' (Singh 193). Religion provided them with courage and hope for a better future and vigour to fight against the oppression by alien rulers (Arnold 1982) [1].

Though he had witnessed other forms of resistance during his formative years, starting with the Sardari Larai, followed by the search for justice by constitutional means, for Birsa too, the use of force was the only way, to rid his people and his land, from the hands of the exploiters. The Ulgulan gave the British the opportunity to further their administration in the region and the people of the area were encouraged to acquire education and obtain jobs.

Though Birsa's nationalist vision may have been limited to the defence of his tribal homeland against the intruders, nevertheless it was his attachment to his soil that made him fight for his homeland. The Ulgulan was not only anti-colonial, it was anti-national too, as the Mundas had rebelled against the dikus, the moneylenders, the rajas, and finally even the missionaries too. To this extent the Christian missionaries were successful in making the tribals development – oriented and aware of their rights and supported them in their struggle. By providing education through their various schools, the missionaries inadvertently sowed the seed of nationalism in the hearts of the tribal people (David, 120). Thus, the tribals were thus successful in winning some degree of legal protection for their land rights and Birsa Munda now remains as a living memory, not only as an apostle of a small religious sect and through the folk songs but as the prophet of the Jharkhand movement and a hero of the extreme Left.

Conclusion

One of the primary reasons for the tribal accepting Christianity was their extreme poverty and economic backwardness. The other reason was that the caste-conscious Hindus did not include the tribal into their society, treated them as outsiders and exploited them and their resources (David 126). The condition of the scheduled castes was better than that of the scheduled tribes as they had their traditional occupations. For the scheduled tribes, agriculture was a newly acquired occupation, which was still in its rudimentary form.

The Christian missionaries promoted a policy of dependency and virtually became "...the father and mother who, in the early stages...was expected to provide food, clothing, jobs, education and medical care." (Schermerhorn 189) Some missionaries were critical of this aspect as the tribal was not been taught to stand on his own feet. The Hindu sahukars or moneylenders also hesitated in advancing loans to the tribal Christians (Jain 81). This is why perhaps the missionaries did not spread their work in the compact villages.

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