

Role of Christian Missionaries in the Sardar Movement of Chotanagpur: A Historical Analysis

Navin Kumar Bara

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of History, Ranchi University

Abstract

The Adivasis* of Chotanagpur† in the eighteenth century encountered significant agrarian disruption due to the influx of new populations brought about by the implementation of the landlord-tenant system under British administration in the region. This episode not only deprived them of their land but also instigated significant social and economic transformations in their lives. Furthermore, in the mid-nineteenth century, the arrival of Christian missionaries significantly influenced their circumstances, fostering a closer relationship with the missionaries. The missionaries endeavour to assist them with legal issues, yet they are also inclined to instigate changes in their lives to mitigate their rebellious tendencies (Sinha 1993:227). Historical evidence demonstrates that the Adivasi communities confronted these challenges with remarkable courage, engaging in a succession of violent uprisings, agrarian agitations, and resistance movements. All these confrontations form the essence of the Sardar Movement‡ during the latter half of the 19th century. This paper endeavours to examine the challenges faced by the Adivasis in their quest for land rights during the latter half of the nineteenth century, while also analysing the involvement of missionaries within this context.

Background

After the grant of Diwani in 1765 the British became the revenue collector of Bengal§. They founded the land system on the unconventional notion that the sovereign possessed land ownership. This system represented a significant departure from the Adivasi concept of collective ownership of village land (Areeparampil 2002:182). The establishment of permanent settlement in 1793 led to the conveyance of intermediate ownership to landlords. The transition transformed raiyats into the tenants of the landlord. In Chotanagpur, the promotion of a significant influx of

* Literary means 'ancient dwellers'. A vernacular term for indigenous people and widely used to refer the tribal population.

† Chotanagpur was the name by which the major part of Jharkhand was known in the 19th century. Up to the last decade of the 19th century, the region was divided into the following districts: Hazaribagh, Singhbhum, Manbhum and Lohardaga. In January 1891 the district of Lohardaga was divided into two – the districts of Ranchi and Palamau. For the purpose of this paper, the district that is more important is that of Lohardaga. It is here that the vast majority of the Munda and the Oraon Adivasis lived.

‡ Also known as *Mulki Larai*, means the fight for the motherland or the country.

§ At that time Bengal included the area of present-day Jharkhand.

outsiders proved to be even more detrimental and resulted in the rise of the *thikadari* system in 1822 with the issuance of rent-farming leases to a new set of middlemen (Mohapatra 1991:27). They were more rapacious and ruthless than the old landlord. They started exploitation of the Adivasis including dispossessions the traditional village headmen in Adivasi villages (Mohapatra 1991:28).

Soon, several violent protests were made against injustice and exploitation under the new regime. One of them was The Great Kol rebellion of 1832 in which the middlemen were terrorized, killed and expelled. After the pacification of the rebellion, the middlemen returned and carried their tirade of revenge against Adivasis. The process of breakdown of the agrarian order continued apace. The peasant proprietary tenures were greatly disturbed and in that way the insurrection recoiled unfavourably on the aboriginals so much so that many Adivasis had to leave the country for distant land in Assam. When after some years they return, the *thikadars* refused to return their lands which they had occupied in the meantime. It was this class of uprooted Adivasis who constituted the nucleus of the Sardar movement (Kumar 1970:52).

Sardar Movement: Chronology

The Sardars represented the Munda and Oraon Adivasis from various region of Chotanagpur. A significant number of them converted to Christianity, as it was common among the Adivasis at that time to believe that such conversion would secure the backing of European missionaries in their struggle for land rights (Virottam 2006: 325). They were the literate individuals among the Adivasis, having received education from the missionaries. Nonetheless, non-Christians and certain traditional village officials were also prominent figures in the movement (MacDougall 1985: 67).

The Sardar movement started in 1850s and lasted for about four decades and later laying the foundation for Birsa Munda's *Ulgulan* (Virottam 2006: 326). The leaders of the agitation claimed that they are the descendants of those who first settled in the land, and hence called themselves Sardars. During 1850s there was an influx into conversion to Christianity. Since after suppression of the 1857 revolt, the government provided aid to native Christians believing that they were oppressed during the revolt by the landlords as the landlords were trying to avenge against the Christians (Bara 2021:60-61). It was interpreted by the Adivasis that if they converted to Christianity, they will get help from government and hence number of converts also rose. Now, the Mundas and Oraons particularly the Christian converts soon began to display a new militancy towards their landlords over encroachments of Adivasis' lands. Some lands were forcibly seized, the landlords retaliated and there was much bloodshed in 1859 (MacDougall 1985: 40).

Following the suppression of disturbances, the authorities commenced in 1860 the preparation of a register for ancestral, low rent Adivasi land (the privileged land) called *bhuinhari* lands. A Nagbanshi^{**} landlord named Loknath Sahi was given the task (Kumar 1970:64). The Adivasis asserted that he was biased in favour of the landlords. The survey was not finished since Sahi passed away in 1862. In 1867, a petition supposedly signed by 14,000 Adivasis was filed to the authorities in Bengal in which Adivasis claimed their land from which they were being dispossessed (MacDougall 1985: 41). In 1869 the government passed the Chotanagpur Tenure Act which provided more extensive survey of *bhuinhari* lands (MacDougall 1985: 41). The survey was conducted between 1869 and 1880. However, because it ignored numerous other classes of tenure and rights, including Adivasis' ancestral rights from the jungle and other land kinds, such as *Sarna* and *Korkar* land, as well as their right over *Khuntkatti* lands, this act also failed to meet Adivasi desires (Roy 1970: 158-9). These lands were gradually being taken up by landlords (Virottam 2006: 327).

In 1876, sixteen Lutheran^{††} missionaries submitted a petition to the government on behalf of the Adivasis, articulating their grievances regarding the oppressions inflicted by the *dikus*^{‡‡} oppressions. However, the government cautioned them against intervening in agrarian matters, as they were apprehensive about maintaining peace in the region. It was also a time of burgeoning rivalry on the international stage between the British and the Germans following Germany's unification. It is conceivable that the government harboured concerns regarding Lutheran's political allegiance to Germany. Subsequently, it became evident during the First World War that the Lutheran missionaries harboured political sentiments (Bara 2021:67). Nevertheless, following a caution from the government, the Lutherans began to distance themselves from the Adivasi land issue (Bara 2021:65). The Sardars endeavoured to persuade them; however, they ultimately found themselves disheartened by the Lutheran response, leading several Sardars to depart from the church (Macdougall 1985:42). During the years 1881, 1885, 1886, and 1887, the Sardars presented numerous petitions to the Secretary of State for India in London; however, their appeals were ultimately dismissed. They also sought assistance from a Catholic mission, which stands in contrast to the Lutheran Church and was actively engaged with the Adivasi community. Their new enthusiast father, Constant Lievens, was eager to assist them in their legal disputes with the landlords and he also maintained good relations with the government during that period (MacDougall 1985:43-44). It is evident that the follower count of the Catholic mission increased

^{**} Ruling dynasty of Chotanagpur

^{††} The Lutheran mission is also known as the German Mission or the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church. The mission has been working among the Adivasis of Chotanagpur since 1845.

^{‡‡} A term used to denote outsiders who came to the region and exploited the local people.

during his tenure of service in Chotanagpur. In 1889, a notable escalation of tensions occurred between the landlords and the Adivasis in western part of the district, the very area where Lievens was engaged in his work. There was also an occurrence of violence, resulting in some property damage. The government deployed forces resulting in the incarceration of many Adivasis (MacDougall 1985:44). The Catholic mission concerned about the development. Furthermore, the commissioner cautioned the Catholic missionaries against interfering with the land matters (Areeparampil 2002:193).

The environment of Chotanagpur during the years 1890 to 1895 grew increasingly tense. The landlords chose not to provide receipts to the raiyats; in response, the Adivasis similarly opted to withhold their rent payments. The Adivasis have reached a state of profound despair regarding the government's actions, having made numerous attempts in the past to seek assistance. Also, on this occasion, the missionaries, having been cautioned by the government, exhibited a notable reluctance to extend their assistance. As the result, the relationship had been fractured between the Sardars and the missionaries concerning the matter of land. Sardar perceived this as a profound betrayal on the part of the mission, leading them to increasingly conclude that both the government and the missionaries were failing to resolve their exploitation. They resolved to place their trust solely in their own community, seeking a native leader capable of delivering justice. They discovered the compelling leader embodied in Birsa Munda, who emerged as a pivotal figure and catalysed the agrarian movement in 1895.

Role of Christian Missions

The missionaries have been operating in Chotanagpur since 1845. They managed to convert a number of Adivasis over the course of the period. The primary reason for the conversion was their assistance with agrarian matters. Also, the missionaries were of European origin, similar to the ruler of the region and frequently maintained positive relation with government officials. The Adivasis perceived this as a strategic opportunity to challenge the landlords. Missionaries recognised that the new converts were primarily motivated by secular advantages rather than spiritual one. Consequently, they opted to assist them with their legal issues. The mission assists the Adivasis while simultaneously facilitating a significant increase in conversions. From 1859 to 1871, there was a significant increase in the number of Lutheran converts, escalating from 1,600 to 17,000, which averages out to approximately 1,283 converts annually. This period marked a significant moment when the mission actively addressed the land issues faced by the Adivasis (Bara 2021:65). However, when they maintained distance from their agrarian issues, they also experienced the repercussions. A significant number of Adivasis,

especially those linked to the Sardar movement, departed from the mission and either aligned themselves with other missions or returned to their ancestral beliefs. A subset of individuals also established an independent sect. The Adivasis experienced a sense of disillusionment towards the missionaries' approach, leading to a decrease in the number of conversions. Between 1880 and 1886, Lutheran missions averaged 234 converts annually (Bara 2021:65). The same applies to Catholics as well. From 1885 to 1888, during the period when Catholics assisted the Adivasis with their agrarian issues, the number of Catholic converts increased significantly from approximately 2,000 to 11,291. Following 1890, when the mission ceased its robust advocacy for Adivasis' land rights, there was a noticeable deceleration in its growth (MacDougall 1985:44-45).

Conclusion

The movement emerged as a result of prolonged suppression of Adivasis within the exploitative framework of colonialism. The Adivasis sought companionship, which they discovered in the form of missionaries. The missionaries found this advantageous as it facilitated their growth in the soil of Chotanagpur by acquiring numerous converts. However, due to the inherent conflict of interests, this friendship was destabilised, and its repercussions were felt throughout the movement. The movement escalated into violence, and under the leadership of Birsa Munda, a significant portion of Chotanagpur rose in opposition to British rule, causing considerable upheaval in that region. Following the suppression of the revolt, the British sought to address the land concerns of the Adivasis through the enactment of the CNT Act of 1908, which aimed to safeguard Adivasi land significantly.

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