

## IMPACT OF MISSIONARIES ON TRIBAL RELIGION IN KORAPUT DISTRICT

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### **Abstract:**

The power of religious belief is always a strong factor qualifying human behaviour. As an integral part of the society, religion exercises great influence on the social habits of the people. The Adivasis were purely religious. They used to worship various elements of nature and so were truly called '**Lovers of Nature.**' Besides, they were polytheists who were worshipping idols and offering animals to their Gods and Goddesses to get their blessings. They were polytheist. They widely believed in supernatural powers. Ancestral worship was also part of their religion. However, with the advent of Missionaries in this district and their contact with these people, there was a tremendous transmutation in the field of tribal religion. People discarded their age old worship and accepted Christianity because this religion has no caste system, untouchability, hard and fast rules and elaboration of rites and rituals and restriction. By incessant endeavour in spite of facing problems, the Missionaries changed the people from violence to peace, cruelty to compassion, animal sacrifice to prayer, spirits and magic spells to belief in God, polytheism to monotheism and superstition to reason. Through this religion, they were able to convince people to recognize their God and realize Him.

**Keywords:** Nature worship, Superstition, Supernatural power, polytheism, Missionaries, Impact

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## Introduction:

The word religion has a pervading meaning. According to our ancient Indian Shastras “**Dharit lokan dhreeyate punyatmabhiih iti dharmah**” It means something which holds people or which people do hold is called religion. Therefore, religion is one of the most sensitive components of society and it goes a long way into the making of a human being. Man is known by the religion he patronises, Man’s talks are rooted in religion, and he lives by religion and follows the rituals of religion. Man can forget and forgive everything but he never tolerates anybody defaming his religion. Therefore, Karl Marx opines “Religion is the opium of Society”.

William F.B. Laurie, an officer of Madras Regiment presents a bleak side of religious practice in Orissa as he remarks, “Orissa may be compared to a huge cauldron which has been boiling for many hundreds of years into which ignorance, stupidity and bigotry have cast as many poisonous ingredients that it is difficult to say when the contents will become purified and good (William, 1850:5). The Hindus of Orissa were the most conservative, dogmatic and priest ridden people who strictly observing ceremonial purity” (Maley, 1917:185).

According to Lee Ltkinson, a famous Nrutattabid and his work, “**Ground work of the Philosophy of religion**”, religion is divided into four categories such as Primitive religion, Naturalistic, Humanistic religion and Spiritual religion. So far as religion of the undivided korapur district is concerned, it was a confluence of all religious activities.

The aboriginals were the true followers of these religions. Though illiterate, indigent, and ignorant, they have been worshipping Nature and Nature’s ingredients since time immemorial. Their interaction with nature has been intense and that has led to formation of many religious practices related to Nature.

## Development of religious concept in the Tribals of Koraput District

The innocent tribal was astonished to reason out the mysteries around him and realised something that was beyond his imagination. He came to realize the benevolent presence of an unseen power. In later stages, this power was recognized as God. Man made himself brave and powerful in the struggle for existence by surrendering himself to this benevolent power and seeking his blessings. He also started worshipping and gradually his worship embodied invocations and rituals to appease God.

With the march of time, Men's thought and consciousness went on changing. At last, he conceived God as Man-like and that He is the supreme power of creation. He also came to believe that the feministic manifestation of this supreme power is the source of all energy and treated Her as the Mother of creation. She is the bread-giver. The universe runs as She wishes. She is present in mountains, hills, rivers, animals, birds, worms and insects. So, She is omnipresent and omnipotent. To please Her worship, prayers, devotion and offerings are indispensable. It is believed that the universe is harmed if She gets fury and natural calamities like flood, storms, cyclones, earthquakes, drought, and famine do break out. Disaster visits the world causing destruction and irreparable loss of mankind.

So, Tribals began to worship Her. This gradually led to the worship of village deities which were common religious beliefs of Orissa. In Tribal way of idol worship, village deities were given utmost importance and priority. Each village had its '**Grama Thakurani.**' She was Almighty and saved the people from all tragedies and tribulations.

❖ **Grama Thakurani** is the titular deity of almost all tribal people of Koraput district. Whenever they felt any illness, they invoked Her and offered both animals and birds to appease Her. They believed that everything happened due to Her propitiation.

From these notions emanated the religious beliefs of the innocent tribals. Hence, they worshipped various elements of Nature as God. During later stages they worshipped statues of Gods made of stone and wood. It is through this practice that they could distinguish their God from other Gods created by their imagination.

According to the Historians, Orissa is the meeting ground of Aryan and non-Aryan people. We find the growth of an advanced civilization in the geographically accessible parts of this state whereas various types of tribal communities have been living in the high hills and mountain tracts of Koraput District. And they had their own social identity and unique culture. The most important among them are Kondhs, Kohla, Gadaba, Santal, Bonda, Bhattara, Koya, Bhuyan, Ho, Paraja, and Savara, Their traditions, customs, beliefs, life styles and ways of earning livelihood were unique. The tribals were the worshippers of Nature. Their Gods were

forest, Dangar, Stream and the earth. They were fully dependent upon these natural environments which provided shelter, food and protection to them. They were the “**Sons of Nature**”

### **Religious scenario of the Tribals on the eve of coming of Missionaries**

For the sake of a bird’s eye view, the essence of tribal religion can be categorized as follows:

1. The Adivasis were the ‘**Lovers of Nature**’ and they used to worship various elements of nature.
2. They were polytheist and pantheon of religion.
3. They believed in supernatural power and spirits.
4. Animal sacrifices and offering blood to their ancestors.
5. The aboriginals used to offer blood of animals to Dharni Pennu (Mother of Earth) for good crops, good cultivations, and good rain and for victory over their enemies. So, was the prevalence of Mariah (human) sacrifice.

As mere categorization will not serve the purpose, both extensive and intensive analysis may be made. Almost all Tribals were cultivators. For the development of agriculture, they were worshipping many Gods and Goddesses. To appease Earth Goddess, ‘Dharnipennu’ the Kondhs were practising the most inhuman practice known as “**Mariah sacrifice**”. The Kondhs were worshipping as many as 84 kinds of Gods and Goddesses.

❖ **Mariah sacrifices** – It was undoubtedly an inhuman custom prevalent among the Kondhs in Koraput. Mariah sacrifice was usually performed on the full moon day of December and January. In the Jeypore territory, the Kuttia Kondhs were in the habit of offering sacrifices to the Goddess Jankery with a view to securing good crops. The victim was seldom carried by force and in most cases it was to be purchased. The Kondhs never sacrificed a stolen victim. They bought victim from the poor Kondhs who used to sell their children. There was no consideration of caste, colour, creed, religion or sex in the choice of the victims. The only restriction was that the Kondh victim was not to be sacrificed in his own village and by his own community. If necessary, victim could be exchanged for another to avoid such a problem. The man destined for sacrifice was immediately carried before the God and a small quantity of rice, coloured saffron was put upon his head. From the moment of his seizure till he was sacrificed, he was kept in a continued state of stupefactions or intoxication. He was allowed to wander about the village and do anything he desired (Padhi, 1992:144).

On the morning made auspicious for the sacrifice, the victim was carried before the idol in a state of intoxication. One of the villagers officiated as a priest, who cut a small hole in the stomach of the victim and the idol was besmeared with the blood that flew from the wound. Then the crowd from the neighbouring villages rushed forward to the altar of sacrifice where the victim was literally cut into pieces and each villager carried away a lump of the flesh and presented it to the idol in his own village. A sacrifice was never offered in any village more than once in twelve years. At a place called 'Bundare' in Bissam Cuttack the practice of the human sacrifice was called 'Junna' in honour of the God of Battle "Manikoro." (Ibid).

'Danteswari' was the supreme deity of the Parajas. The Gadaba worshipped 'Ganga Devi'. The presiding deity of the Gonds was "Jhulan Devi". The 'Ho' community kept a stone image on the altar of Goddess 'Pabhati' under a saltree and worshipped her. Like that the Koyas never cutoff 'Mahul Tree' and worshipped there by keeping the deities and their Goddess under it. 'Hund' was the tutelary deity of Bonda community. They made an altar at the foot of a tree at the end of the village and worshipped her. By the help of priest Dehury, the Bhuyan worshipped 'Gram-Mangala' and 'Gram-Shiri', 'Gudi-Mata' was the village deity of the Koyas. They worshipped their Goddess by offering cocks and wine. Besides that, they worshipped Earth Goddess.

The Paraja community worshipped village Goddess 'Sinda' and the Juangs worshipped 'Thanpati' for the welfare of the village. The 'Hos' worshipped their ancestors as their Home deity. The Santalis worshipped the tutelary deity of a family (Patnaik, 2009: 8-11).

The Bhattaras observed Chaitra festival in the month of April and worshipped 'Basumati'. They accepted 'Bija pandu' as their own tutelary deity. The Bhuyans worshipped Goddess 'Basumata'. The Santals worshipped in the name of 'Sinbonga' for the sake of agriculture. Besides that, they celebrated a number of festivals such as 'Ekarsim', 'Hariar Sim' and "Janthar Hare".

Some tribal communities of Koraput worshipped another God in an extra ordinary way, for example, they engraved big eyes and mouth on the body of a tree and set fire around that tree and worshipped.

The Gond community worshipped three Gods known as ‘Bhudadeo’ Linga’ and ‘Jangha’. These Gods were worshipped as the representative of Jagannath, Balabhadra and Goddess Subhadra. It was said that when Vidyapati took away the tribal God, Shree Neela Madhab, the tribals lost their tutelary God and gave up food and happiness for days together and prayed to God with strong devotion. Neelamadhab was very much impressed and pleased with their prayers and devotion and said in the dream, “Vidyapati could not take away me completely and for your worship and prayer, I have left my legs. So you would worship that and get my blessings”. Since that day, the tribals have been worshipping them year after year.

‘Daru Brahma’ or ‘Darudebata’ once worshipped by Savara is now known as Jagannath, the tutelary God of the universe, the adorable one of whole mankind. The head of priests of Jagannath temple at Puri belong to the Savaras, known as ‘Daityas’ because ‘Neela Madhab’ was their tutelary deity and was being worshipped by Viswabasu, the Savara chief ( bid).

The Parajas, for escaping from famine, put wood in the agricultural field and prayed for Rains. The Savaras worshipped their ancestors before agricultural work and hunting spree. They observed various festivals at different times. They observed Kurulpur at the time of clearing of forest, sowing of seeds and harvesting of crops. They celebrated festivals like ‘Jamalpur’, ‘Banpur’ and ‘Lambapur’. Such were the styles and methods the tribals followed to worship Gods or tutelary deities on particular occasions to fulfill their desire and work.

It is said that tree is the most valuable property of the tribals. They worshipped tree and creatures as per their prevalent custom. The most important trees they worshipped in different places were phylanthus emblica, Embroy (Garbhana), Karam, Neem Peepal Tree, Saltree and Banyan Tree (Ibid).

The Kondhs were worshipping female deity “Mother Earth” to be found in almost all tribal religions. The Kondhs worshiped Her as ‘Nirantala’ or ‘Dharni Pennu’ Jankery was also worshipped as Goddess of the Earth. They believed in spirits and magical practices. Spirits played a vital role in the concepts of mythical world and religious practices of Hinduism. The ‘Bhutos’ (Bhutas) was one of this tradition. The tribal religions in general had taken over the spirit worship found in Hinduism. “Duma” another conception related to post funeral ritual was practised by the tribals. For community well-being and group solidarity, their religious

performances included life crises, cyclic community rites, ancestor and totemic rites and observance of taboos. They also resorted to various types of occult practices (Ibid).

The tribals of Koraput district were by and large polytheists who believed and propitiated a number of Gods and Goddesses, spirits-benevolent, malevolent and ambivalent, etc. The ancestral cult was highly venerated and worshipped at regular intervals. They also believed in magic and practised the same at the time of need, for good and evil purposes. Their life crises rituals, such as child birth, puberty, marriage and death were performed with care as per their customs. Each community had its own sacredotal chief, other religious practitioners, like shamans and shamanist, magicians, indigenous medicine-men and astrologers etc. The Sun God and Mother Earth occupied very high positions in their theological pantheon (Ibid).

Besides tribal culture and religion, Koraput district witnessed the existence of various religious groups like Buddhism, Jainism, Shaktism, and Shaivism and Brahmanism among the high caste people before the coming of the Missionaries to this land.

#### **Reasons of propensity towards Christianity**

The Hindus observed thirteen festivals in twelve months and so it was very expensive. Above all, in Hinduism there were very hard and fast rules, elaboration of rites and rituals and domination of priests. Besides that, there was rigidity of caste system and untouchability. Hinduism was the religion of high caste and the rich. On the other hand, the Christians celebrated limited festivals like X-Mas, Easter and Good Friday. This religion is based on simple mode of worship and shunned caste system. It gave importance to fatherhood of God and brotherhood of mankind. There was no bar to any communities. Above all, it was a cheaper religion with no priest to dominate. However, the tribals accepted this religion being perturbed by caste prejudice and socio-economic discrimination found in Hinduism.

#### **Role of Missionaries to Implant Christianity**

When the Missionaries came to this region, the mode of tribal worship went through drastic change. It was because, the missionaries tried to implant Christianity in place of tribal religion and adopted strong measures to demolish Hinduism in this area.

The missionaries observed the religious activities of the people minutely and thereafter slowly and gradually interfered into their religious life. The Missionaries had taken certain steps for creating faith towards Jesus Christ and developing the ideology of monotheism.

1. The missionaries attacked and demolished their age long traditions, customs, rites, rituals, festivals and ceremonies and placed Jesus Christ on the top of tribal religion.
2. They convinced and persuaded people about their messiah that He is the only God who is a **liberator and protector**. Such an atmosphere was created that people spontaneously accepted Christianity and abandoned their own religion. They gave up worshipping their ancestors and tutelary deities. The Missionaries convinced people and developed the concept that only Jesus Christ would save them from sin and help them in the deliverance of soul.
3. The missionaries emphasized and propagated monotheism.
4. They stood antagonist to idolatrous worship and elaborate rites and rituals
5. The Converted Christians were forbidden to attend any kind of Hindu festivals, ceremonies and social gatherings and if anybody dared to do so, he was given serious punishment. Students were not allowed to hear and learn Hindu prayers and lyrics.
6. Hinduism related curriculum was not taught at Christian educational institutions and their minds and activities were concentrated only on Christianity. They were teaching against Hinduism in schools. Bible stories, Hymns, liturgies and syllabus related to Christianity were given much importance.
7. The missionaries stressed only Trinitarians of Christianity (i.e. the union of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in one God).
8. Christianity taught people about human virtues like, love, pity, kindness, sympathy, truth, fraternity, forgiveness, sacrifice and emphasis was given on prayer and devotion. In this religion there is no austerity or rules nor any rigidity of caste system, nor untouchability.
9. There was no elaboration of rites and rituals and domination of priesthood.
10. This religion was less expensive in comparison to Hinduism and dead against animal sacrifice, which was the basic principle of the Adivasis.

The missionaries were against idol - worship. Polytheism, magic spells sorcery, spirits, animal sacrifice, rites, rituals, customs, traditions, ceremonies etc and propounded monotheism. Christianity believes in simple prayers and love of humanity. They propagated that Jesus is the **creator, liberator, and saviour** of mankind; he symbolizes living God and protector of mankind. The Christian missionaries, behaved towards the converted Christians aggressively and rudely who by chance attended any Hindu ceremonies or social gatherings. They prohibited and



prosecuted them severely. The missionaries rivaled Hinduism. They introduced purely Christian based curriculum and teaching against Hinduism was one of its parts.

In this way, they developed an idea of antipathy and derision against Hindu culture and Hindu philosophy. That's why, the Missionaries established separate mission schools to disseminate Christianity among the students. Even separate mission compound was established for the converted Christians to keep them isolated from the Hindus.

### **Impact of Christianity on Tribal and their religion**

The power of religious belief is always a strong factor qualifying human behaviour. As an integral part of the society, religion exercises great influence on the people in their social habits. The Adivasis were purely religious and they were the 'Lovers of Nature' and worshipping various elements of Nature. Besides that, they were worshipping idols and offering animals like cocks and hens to their Gods and Goddesses to get their blessings. They were polytheist and pantheist. They widely believed in supernatural powers (like magic, spells, spirits, and sorcery), animism, animatims, fetishism and anthropomorphism. Ancestral worship was also part of their religion and was widely prevalent in the tribal society.

The religious, magical rituals and observances pervaded almost the whole life of the people. Taboos, omens, auspicious moment, beliefs in witches, and sorcery, offering blood for fulfillment of certain desires were common among the Tribals of Koraput District. But missionaries went against all these practices and tried to establish the principle of single God and single religion which would be based on prayer, self less service, personal sacrifice, love, affection and dedication. Due to incessant endeavour of the missionaries, the people moved from animal sacrifice to simple prayer and accepted Jesus Christ as their Saviour.

Whatever might be the motives of the missionaries by doing these, people forgot their ancestral worship, polytheism, tutelary deities etc and worshipped Jesus as Messiah and as living God and did not look back.

To this, the missionaries propounded humanistic values like love, affection, charity, chastity, fraternity and sacrifice. A religion of peace, Christianity rejected all hard and fast rules and elaborates rites and rituals found in Hinduism. In this religion there is no room for caste system and untouchability. Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of mankind is its motto. It needs only Sunday worship, simple prayer, devotion and self-purification and no need of offering

animals. Unlike Hinduism, this religion is less expensive and so is the religion of mass. There is no restriction to anybody irrespective of caste, creed, colour and sex to follow the simple principles of Christianity which leads to one's salvation. There is no fear of clutches of priests and high endowment and gift in religious activities. By observing such traits and motivation of the missionaries, the people spontaneously accepted Jesus Christ as their saviour or Messiah. The lower caste people also accepted Christianity to escape from the rigidity of caste system and expensive rites and rituals of Hinduism. So, it is seen that, there was a drastic change among the people. They moved from violence to peace and abandoned their aged long traditions and customs. Those days, being a Christian meant progress, protection, upliftment and peace. So, people impulsively dragged themselves towards Christianity and after that, this religion spread rapidly in this district.

There was a tremendous change in the existing system of worship. By this new religion, the Missionaries could change the people from violence to peace, cruelty to compassion, animal sacrifice to prayer and devotion, spirits and magic spells to believing in God only, polytheism to monotheism and superstition to reason. Through this religion, they were able to convince people to recognize their God and realize Him for the transmigration of Soul. So, Christianity had tremendous impact on the minds of the people. The lower caste people accepted Christianity due to socio- -religious cause.

**Conclusion:**

No doubt, there was evil machination behind its evangelical activities, but the role played by the missionaries in this context was noteworthy. Later on a number of religious movements started in India in 19th century to reform the society but the Christian missionaries of Breklum Mission were the fore runner of them.

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