

**COLONIAL STATE, CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES, CONGRESS  
AND TRIBAL QUESTION IN BIHAR IN 1930's**

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## CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation titled “**Colonial State, Christian Missionaries, Congress and Tribal Question in Bihar in 1930’s**”, submitted by **Shiv Shakti Nath Bakshi** in partial fulfillment for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** is his original work. This dissertation has not been submitted for any other degree to this university or to any other university to the best of our knowledge.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The mysteriously dark forests studded with seasonal flowers, the hilly terrain, greenery of paddy fields and dusty mineral mines are some of the features that characterizes the state of Jharkhand. The landscape and its people, with their diversity and charm, give a fascinating imagery. I was primarily concerned with exploring my surroundings in their historical dimension, mainly being a student of history and also as part of the state of Jharkhand.

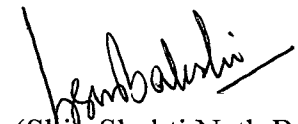
I express my heartfelt gratitude to my Supervisor, Prof. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, for guiding me through the course of this dissertation. I must admit that without his timely advice, help and suggestions, this work would not have been completed. I thank him for patiently listening to my arguments and giving me all kinds of encouragement, which made it possible for me to complete this work.

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(Shiv Shakti Nath Bakshi)

## INTRODUCTION

As the title suggest, this dissertation intends to focus on the historical dimension of the process of interaction between the Colonial State, Christian missionaries, tribes and the Congress which took place within “tribal complex”<sup>1</sup> of Bihar during 1930s. The penetration of Colonial State’s elements into hitherto somewhat ‘secluded’ region of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana<sup>2</sup> saw reaction, rebellion and turmoil. At the same time we come across the process of accommodation and adjustment which allowed the Colonial State to pacify the agitating tribal population on the one hand and also create an environment where its authority may get acceptance. The colonial state’s attempt to include the tribal world within its framework also paved way for multi dimensional change among the “scheduled tribes”.<sup>3</sup> It

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<sup>1</sup> I am using the term “tribal complex” to treat as a whole, the pluralistic character, diverse streams of culture and different cluster of communities with their distinct life-styles that together make the tribal world.

<sup>2</sup> Now Jharkhand State

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘tribe’ stands disputed. (please see Susane B.C. Devally; *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand*). The term ‘schedule tribe’ is used as it is officially so named. Henceforth, in the paper term ‘tribe’ will be used as it is generally so categorize and not for any theoretical supposition.

was under such circumstances that the Christian Missionaries and the Congress sought to negotiate space for themselves in the tribal complex.

The term “Tribal Question” has been chosen in the context of widely understood processes at work in the tribal complex. It may be alleged that the aforesaid term seems loaded in favour of those attempting to study tribal question from a distance and also as an outsider to a certain extent. It may be suggested that those seeking to address ‘tribal issues’ had their own visions and models of ‘development’ which they sought to impose on the tribal world by fashioning them accordingly. The attempts of the Colonial State to place tribal societies within its ambit, the evangelizing and proselytizing zeal of the Christian Missionaries, and, the Congress’ endeavour to accommodate and associate them with the overall framework of national movement may be said to be responsible for the then emerging debates on ‘tribal question’. That these forces to a certain extent appeared to be claiming the mantle of modernizing agents did not stop them from contesting for their own space within the tribal complex, irrespective of their concurring views on a number of issues. In this study it will be attempted to look at the ‘tribal question’ as it was then understood by these forces and also the tribal response and aspiration.

This study focuses on the period of 1930's. The selection of the time period is solely aimed at studying the interaction of the Colonial State, the Christian Missionaries and the Congress within the tribal complex of Bihar working in simultaneity. The formation of Congress Ministry in 1937 and its rule between 1937 and 1939 provides an opportunity to study an altogether different dimension. The era after the Ulgulan of Birsa Munda in 1899-1900 and the enactment of Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 saw an end to the violent upsurge and rebellions and subsequent pacification of the tribals. We fail to come across any major agrarian question after 1908, but that did not necessarily thwart the building of tribal political consciousness. The formation of tribal organizations, demands for separate statehood, redefining of the concept of 'diku',<sup>4</sup> demands for irrigation, education, job reservations etc., were developments concurrent with the introduction of elections and the activities of the missionaries, the Congress and the Colonial State. The following events mainly underline the importance of the period of 1930s:-

1. The formation of Adivasi Sabha under Jaipal Singh.
2. The Government of India Act, 1935.
3. The demand for separate statehood.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Diku'-may be loosely translated as outsiders for the present purpose.

4. The formation of Congress Ministry, 1937-'39.
5. Social works by Congress among the tribals.
6. Political division between christian and non-christian tribals.

It will not be unjustified to say that the social scientists have mostly confined their studies to the period of tribal revolts, insurrections and rebellions. In the 1930's we witness a shift in the mode of mobilization leading to socio-cultural and political movement among the tribals in place of hitherto violent, disorganized and sporadic outbursts mostly centered around "millenarianism". The period after 1908, i.e. the year of the enactment of Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act not only saw the pacification of the tribals but also initiated the process in which the tribal re-organization around new issues and aspirations was sought. It was not that the tribals remained a stagnant and static whole, but became all the more dynamic by the intervention of the christian missionaries and the Congress which in some way or the other also induced formation of many socio-political groups. Keeping in mind such dynamic process this study also intends to look at following dimensions: -



1. The 'tribal question' as then understood by the Congress, the Christian Missionaries and the Colonial State and their approach thereof.
2. Socio-cultural change within the tribal complex and formation of socio-political and other groups.
3. The impact of the Congress and the national movement among the tribals.
4. The creation of tribal consciousness/identity/class and inherent problems associated with such process.
5. Tribal response.

The study of the tribes has invited the attention of historians, anthropologists, ethnographers, sociologists, administrators etc., who have made available numerous accounts in their respective fields and disciplines. A large number of researches are available which have rather than limiting the scope have further widened the field of tribal study.

To comprehend various dimensions of the study already enumerated, it has been attempted to look into various correspondences between the congress workers engaged in the region. *Dr. Rajendra Prasad's Correspondence and Selected Documents* edited by Valmiki Chowdhary

gives valuable informations in this regard. *The Simon Commission Report on India (Indian Statutory Commission)* gives details of the “tribal question” as understood by the colonial rulers, the Adibasi Sabha and the Christian Missionaries. It also gives an insight into the different aspects of the debates which were considered important and the policy makers appear to be primarily concerned with them. *Linlithgow Collection*, available in microfilms in Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, contains “Fortnightly Reports”, of the Governors of Bihar to Linlithgow, the then Governor General of India (1934 to 1943 excepting a brief period in 1938 when Baron Brabourne officiated as Governor-General), and mainly focusses the Congress Ministry’s activities between 1937 and 1939. *Nishkalanka* a Roman Catholic Mission’s journal and *Chhota Nagpur Mission Letters*, gives information about the activities of the Missionaries in the tribal regions of Bihar, the problems faced by them, the manner in which they sought to organize christian tribals and induce socio-cultural change and the way they endeavoured to shape political consciousness of the tribals.

*Munda and Their Country*, a book by S. C. Roy, published in 1912 is of immense importance given the insight it gives into the tribal life of Bihar. This book is one of earliest of its kind which deals elaborately with the

ethnographical details in anthropo-historical perspective. Roy has shown his rigour of analysis in collecting data from folklores and tribal-non-tribal traditions. He is all praise for Christian Missionaries, but he falls short of analyzing colonial impact on the tribal societies. He seems to have neglected the role of non-tribals in influencing the historical processes through which the tribal society underwent and for him non-tribal-tribal interaction appeared to have been of marginal value. While his work remains constrained by these limitations, credit may be given to him for the rigour of analysis which he has shown in the context of the time when his work was published. His attempt to study folklores and tribal tradition certainly paved the way in shaping later research in this field.

*Profiles of Tribal Culture in Bihar*, a book by Sachchidanand was first published in 1965. While the first chapter may be taken as a general introduction to tribal culture in Bihar, the rest of the book is divided into five parts each dealing with one specific aspect of culture. His work appears to be plain narrative with little theoretical generalization. While he has emphasized the point that tribes were not living in isolation but very much interacted with the non-tribals, he has not been able to stress the role of Christian missionaries. He has also not taken into account the social tension which was

generated in the face of colonial economy, non-tribal and Christian Missionary's intervention in tribal life. Sachchidanand's work seems to be a sociologist's account who resorts to ethnography for his analysis. His work mainly suffers from the limitation of overlooking political movements and thereby fails to comprehend historical processes in their own perspective.

*Tribal Society in India-An Anthro-Historical Perspective* is a work of K. Suresh Singh in which he has tried to analyse various 'multilinear' and 'unilinear' processes which according to him have influenced the tribal world in course of history. K. S. Singh proceeds with his analysis to evaluate tribal complex in anthro-historical perspective, at the same time seeking to dismantle the hitherto assumptions seeing tribals either as 'isolates' or as 'subsystem' of Hindu system. He rejects the model which considers tribes to be 'isolates' saying that such a model is inadequate to explain the situation of 'continental diversity' and hence suggests a 'multilinear' alternative to explain the dynamism and complexity of social process. He assigns special role to link languages like "Sadari", a whole corpus of local customs – 'lokachara' and 'desachara' shared by both tribals and non-tribals and the role of emigrating peasantry in the spread of epic tradition and bhakti movement from the plains of north to the hills of middle India. He also tries to look into

the interaction of Varna, Jati and Jana. He also elaborates on the concept of 'tribalisation' which he understands as acceptance of tribal mores, rituals and beliefs by emigrating communities.

*Swami Sahajanand and the Peasants of Jharkhand*, is a work edited and translated by Walter Hauser and published in 1995. Walter Hauser has translated this text on tribals of Chhota Nagpur written by Swami Sahajanand, a prominent Kisan leader of Bihar and founder of Bihar Kisan Sabha. This work acquires importance as it brings us closer to the understanding of a political activist in the colonial period. Although the book mostly gives general views on tribals that prevailed at the time, it cannot be said to be entirely bereft of academic content. While Swami Sahajanand applauds the role of the christian missionaries among the tribals of Jharkhand, he laments the kind of exploitation unleashed by the 'Dikus', industrialists like Tatas and even by the colonial rules and regulations. He considers the Zamindars, their agents, the government and its agents who demand an unending array of fees, levies, taxes and bribes, as perpetrators of exploitation. The degree of this exploitation makes Sahajanand to address the issue of peasant activism and mobilization. He even attacks the purveyors of religion, in this case the christian missionaries whose work in education he admires, but whose

attempt to separate 'Adivasi Christian Kisan', from wider population he condemns. At the end of the book he also suggests a number of measures which may ameliorate the condition of the tribals. It will also be not improper to say that he seeks to explore answers to tribal question in the idioms of modernity. Even the questions raised by him subscribes to the understanding of tribal problem in the kind of colonial perspective which adheres to modernism.

Susan B. C. Devalle's work, *Discourses of Ethnicity-Culture and Protest in Jharkand*, is another attempt to examine the tribal life in theoretical perspective. This book which was published in 1995, mostly concentrates in theoretical generalization through Marxist methodology. The outlines of the historical perspective in which according to her discourses of ethnicity are created and which may be served to create hegemony of dominant classes and even be a tool in the hands of those who seek to resist the dominance. Devalle tries to expose the contradiction within nationalist and state-ist discourse. According to her it is through the populist nationalist ideologies based on imagining the community of 'nation', that the elites attempt to attain monopoly over the social project and cultural revivalism provides legitimating support for these ideologies in the shape of 'invented-traditions'.

The writer has tries to pose domination-subordination question in historical, sociological and anthropological context. She also appears to be looking into the Jharkhand movement as an expression of the protest of the oppressed who in some way of the other attempted to resist the state suppression constituted by the dominant class. Although she concedes of the lack of class-consciousness, she presumes that the separatist content of the movement would arm it with the required capabilities to challenge the dominance. She also portrays an ongoing contest between the culture of oppression and the culture of protest. Her conceptualization seems problematic as she pre-supposes unchanging nature of state, addresses tribals as a whole failing to see the internal diversity and tribal-non tribal relationship. The framework which she follows constantly emphasizes a continuous tension in the tribal-non tribal groups as her generalization mostly banks on disjunctions in the tribal complex which necessarily leads to the sort of categorization she uses.

K. N. Sahay's work, *Under the Shadow of the Cross*, published in 1976 is a study on the impact of the christian missionaries work in Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana. He has taken into account the mode and methods of the christian missionaries in their pursuance of evangelization and proselytisation projects. It has also been attempted to outline the history of

different missionaries working in the region and their distinct methodology and philosophy. The internal rivalry, competition and contest between different missionaries in acquiring the number of converts gives an altogether different picture to the reader. He has also termed the christian missionaries as modernizing agents and locates them in the political and economic context of the time where the tribals were tied down by the kind of rules and regulations which were oppressive in nature. The link between the Colonial State and the Christian Missionaries also allowed the tribals to seek redressal and relief from their oppression through the christian missionaries. He also attempts to outline the tension generated by the proselytisation project of christian missionaries which created a gulf between the tribal “Sarana” religion and neo-converts.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century conception “tribes” and “tribal, societies” though today stands disputed,<sup>5</sup> it exercised immense influence in the colonial policy formation and law making. The intellectual environment which remained loaded in favour of such understanding and produced constructs and stereotypes of mythical proportion. This dissertation examines some of these constructs and also endeavours to suggest a background of the period of our

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<sup>5</sup> Both K.S. Suresh Singh and Susane B.C. Devalle suggests such conclusions.



enquiry. It would be in the fitness of the things to attempt to delineate the historical forces at work which converges in the events and multidimensional processes in the tribal complex witnessed by the 1930's. The entry of the of Colonial State in tribal areas of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana and subsequent revolts, resurrections and turmoils followed by pacification of the tribes and new modes and methods of socio-political movements need to be understood. The impact of the activities of the Christian missionaries on the socio-cultural life of the tribes and influence of national movement and the Congress may be studied against such a background.

## **1. COLONIAL APPROACH TOWARDS THE TRIBAL QUESTION IN BIHAR**

The expansion of colonial state in the Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana region brought it in interface with complex socio-cultural system. The tradition, values, mores, morals, practices, political and social organisations, languages etc. posed a challenge to the colonial rulers as they presented intricate patterns operating within variegated networks. The colonial policies were to be framed in such a manner which was to be in consonance with the colonial interests and, at the same time, invite minimum resistance. This required efforts on the part of the colonial administrators and policy makers to categorize and codify the prevalent socio-cultural patterns of the region. Attempts at codification, categorization, theoretical constructions and reconstructions, understanding the entire socio-economic and political system entailed traversing through a confusing and diversified terrain.

In this chapter, attempts will be made to study the colonial project vis-à-vis “tribes”, the Simon Commission and debates on special status to Chhota Nagpur, the agenda of the Adibasi Sabha and its pro-separation

movement and views of the Congress and the bureaucracy and the overall colonial policy.

### **Colonial Project vis-à-vis “tribes”**

“Indiscriminately referred as *chuars* and *dakaits* in official correspondence, these people were contemptuously regarded as impure and illiterate *savages*’ capable of plunder and rapine”<sup>1</sup> in the beginning, later the official discourse emphasized attempts to establish definite enquiries about land tenurial system, the rights and liabilities to revenue and relationship between the British Government and Maharajah of Chhota Nagpur, the zamindars, the jagirdars and the cultivating subjects. The difficulty in determining the exact nature and character of the prevalent system further hindered the process of categorisation and codification leading to theoretical constructions, problematisation and re-constructions. As a result we come across various categories like village community, commune system, race, aborigines, caste, tribes etc. seeking to locate the existing system. The problem was compounded in the absence of any organized religious system, written scriptures, written laws and other elements of modernity and it posed no lesser challenge than they had in defining the term Hindu at macro-level. “As census

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<sup>1</sup> Sangeeta Das Gupta; ‘*Reordering Tribal Worlds: Tana Bhagat Missionaries and The Raj*’; Ph.D Thesis, JNU; p.17; Year not mentioned.

enumerators deliberated, debated and wavered as to whether the term ‘Hindu’ implied a ‘race’, a ‘nationality’, a ‘religion’, or a ‘set of practices’, the term ‘aboriginal tribes’, ‘tribals’ was shifted along a string of appellations: ‘aborigines’, ‘aboriginal races’, ‘nationalities’, ‘tribes and tribals’.”<sup>2</sup> Sangeeta Dasgupta discussing this colonial projects writes:

“Thus, the colonial process of codification was of a dual nature. On the one hand, there were detailed enquiries into customary laws, property relations, collective rights to the village communes and forests, and inheritance patterns — all of which were to be determined and codified... From the earliest times, thus had been the endeavours of British officials and their native informants; they were to be preserver of a tradition that was disappearing...The production of colonial knowledge was thus caught within the conflicting process of incorporation and appropriation, restoration and reconstitution, preservation and destruction.”<sup>3</sup>

The colonial project to comprehend the questions linked to the tribal societies and to accordingly fashion and refashion its policies necessitated the job to be undertaken by anthropologists, historians, ethnographers, administrators and others. The anthropologists and the ethnographers, on

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

whose works, the colonial policy makers mainly relied often, got swayed by the prevalent anthropological notions which portrayed the tribals sometimes as isolates and on the other in constant conflict with the non-tribal populace. It was often argued that the process of ‘Sanskritisation’ – ‘Hinduisation’ was unilinear and inimical to the tribal interest and the tribals stood vulnerable in the face of outside influence. “There was little understanding of the nature and function of the tribal mode of production and of the role of colonial system in its subversion, and of economic factor underlying the process of change in the tribal areas in most of the ethnographic literature. Through their writings, the anthropologists rationalized the colonial system and projected it as the benefactor of tribes.”<sup>4</sup> “The anthropologists displayed a one sided view of the process of interaction between the Hindus and the tribal communities in terms of Brahmanisation, Hinduisation or Sanskritisation of the latter.”<sup>5</sup> Such simplistic understanding of the socio-cultural realities regarding the tribals made the colonial policy makers look upon themselves as being endowed with the ‘duty’ of ‘civilizing’ the ‘savage’ and in pursuance of a system of protection from the oppressive non-tribal (say Hindu) system and its polluting influence. Perhaps, under the impact of such an understanding of the things

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<sup>4</sup> Singh, K.S.; *Tribal Society in India – An Anthro-Historical Perspective*; Manohar Publications, New Delhi 1985, pp. 10-15.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

that there developed the “Isolationist Vs Integrationist” debate. G.S. Ghurye identifies three schools of thought seeking to address tribal question by proposing a plan of action in the light of their own understandings. These three schools he enumerates as: (1) No change and revivalism, (2) Isolationism and preservation; and (3) Assimilation.<sup>6</sup> Verrier Elwin, one of the chief protagonists of the Isolationist school<sup>7</sup> writes in the conclusion of his pamphlet; “The Loss of Nerve”, published in 1941, “I am not one of those who advocate a policy of absolute isolation, but I do urge a policy of isolation from debasing and impoverishing contact. The aborigines cannot remain as he is — but it is necessary for him to pass through a long period of degradation before he emerges as the civilized man of the future? Could we not keep him in his innocence and happiness for a while till civilization is more worthy to instruct him and until a scientific age has learnt how to bring development and change without causing despair?”<sup>8</sup> “In 1935 the late Rai Bahadur S.C. Ray opined regarding the Hill Bhuiyas, that their increasing contact with other castes and tribes had widened their central outlook and had removed certain old prejudices and fears. With all that, they had preserved much of their original simplicity, sense of self-respect, and independence of spirit, along with much

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<sup>6</sup> Ghurye, G.S.; ‘*The Scheduled Tribes*’; Popular Prakashan; Bombay; Pub. 1963, p. 172.

<sup>7</sup> Ghurye, G.S., identifies him as a no changer and revivalist; *ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*; p. 113.

of their traditional experience of life.”<sup>9</sup> G.S. Ghurye Considered as an integrationist writes, “The effective solution of the problem lies in strengthening the ties of the tribals with the other backward classes through their integration. The theoretical background can be provided by a brief but integrated account of the social and religious life of the tribals.”<sup>10</sup>

Comprehension of the tribal question necessitated the constituents of the tribal socio-cultural pattern to be located within a construction of a history which in turn was to essentialise anthropological concepts. The construction of such a discourse, which remained uncontested and acquired sacrosanct status deeply imbued the minds of not only the policy makers but also the educated tribal leaders and western educated intelligentsia. A Deputation from Chhota Nagpur Improvement Society to Simon Commission, says, “Alien Hindu interlopers have been enabled to do this (exploitation) by either fraud or force partly through our over simplicity and mainly through the mistakes committed by the British government in throwing us without taking account of our past history, into the melting pot of common law and common administrative system with more advanced districts.”<sup>11</sup> In the same address it was later stated, “The Mahabharata, the national epic of Hindus records the achievements of the

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>11</sup> Address by Rev. Joel Lakra (spokesman), Chhota Nagpur Improvement Society; read by Chairman; Simon Commission Report; Vol. XVI; P. 446.

Munda 'Sovereign, Jarasandha', who ruled northern India from Rajgriha or Rajgir in this very district of Patna, and our tradition speaks of Karakh, or Kurush one of our ancestors who once ruled over what is now the Shahabad district and gave his name to that country as Kurushdesh, as Buchanan in his memoirs tells us and Montgomery Martin in his Eastern India records. Similar traditions of the ancient rule cover other parts of India might be cited in profusion."<sup>12</sup>


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The construction of a memory of a glorious past based on obscure evidence and interpretation of folklores and traditions along with a sense of exploitation, alienation and sufferings created the elements for the reconstitution of identity. Such identity was further sought to be extended over fifty eight per cent population of the Chhota Nagpur categorizing them as aboriginal and semi-aboriginal tribes.<sup>13</sup> But such categorization too was further problematised. The other thirty percent population was represented as "mostly all aboriginals in origin but (they have) risen in social scale and (they have) become hinduised."<sup>14</sup> Mr. Hallett, while disposing before the Simon Commission, further states, "By saying, that there is a large number of animists who have become hinduised, it means that they are classed as Hindus and not

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*; P. 447.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*; Clause 63; P. 450.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*; Clause 64.

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as aboriginals. That takes away about 30 per cent of the population. Then there is 10 per cent of the Hindus who come from outside and whose interests, as history shows, are more or less against the interests of the aboriginal tribes.”<sup>15</sup> Such kind of categorization fitted well with the prevalent understanding which was explained as “Tribal Religions” in Simon Commission report. “There are still found in various parts of India in certain hill and jungle regions, aboriginal tribes whose beliefs as to the unseen world are bound up with the practice of worshipping or propitiating the forces and objects of nature and the spirits which they conceive to reside in natural phenomena. Primitive peoples do not claim to belong to any particular religion. They only know of their own beliefs, and are, therefore unconscious of religious classifications.”<sup>16</sup>

It seems pertinent here to take note of British arrival in the Chhota Nagpur region before proceeding to analyse the colonial policies and its impact in proper perspective. In 1765, “Chhota Nagpur passed into the hands of East India company as part of the Diwani of Bihar of which it is known as Mokharjee (dismembered) mechal in jamabandi (revenue-return) prepared by Mahomed Reza Khan on behalf of the Company.”<sup>17</sup> S.C. Roy divides the Period between 1765 and 1912 under five heads; viz. :-

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*; Clause 66; P. 451.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*; Vol. I; P. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Roy, S.C.; *The Mundas and Their Country*; P. 372.

- (1) Mokherjee Period – 1765-1770
- (2) Period of Military Collectorship – 1771-1779
- (3) Ramgarh Regulation District Period – 1779- 1833
- (4) The South Western Frontier Agency Period – 1834-1854
- (5) The Period of Commissionership – 1854-1902

The last period which saw a number of regulations and administrative measures was also characterized by tribal discontent which was manifested in numerous revolts, insurrections and violent upsurge of varying intensity. It may be said that the enactment of the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act, 1908, in the post Birsa revolt of 1899-1900 period, somewhat pacified the tribals by addressing their agrarian grievances to a certain degree. “The survey and settlement operations of 1902-1910 and the Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908, however did provide some very belated recognition to *Khuntkatti* rights and banned *beth begar*. Chhota Nagpur tribals won a degree of legal protection for their land rights a generation in advance of the bulk of Bihar peasantry.”<sup>18</sup> Further, arrangements were made to keep the tribal areas also referred as scheduled districts, out of the ambit of reform, by terming them Excluded or partially Excluded regions. Such arrangement actually divested the legislature from acquiring direct power to legislate in the matter of these regions by

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<sup>18</sup> Sumit Sarkar; *Modern India, 1885-1947*; Pp.47-48; Macmillan India Limited; Madras; Pub, 1983.

vesting the authority to enforce such laws in the Executive. The region of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana constitutionally termed as “backward-tract”, vide Government of India Act, 1919, was placed within the provision of Modified Exclusion which provided:-

- “1. The Governor in Council may direct that any Act of the provincial legislature shall not apply to the tract, or shall apply subject to such exceptions and modifications as the Governor may think fit.
2. The legislative Assembly or the Provincial legislature, when making laws solely applicable to the backward tract in question or any part of it, must insert a provision that the law shall come into force only on such date and subject to such exceptions or modifications as may be ordered by the Governor-General in Council or the Governor in Council as the case may be.”<sup>19</sup>

### **Special Status for Chhota Nagpur : The Simon Commission**

It seems that there was more or less consensus on the issue that in light of the distinct demographic, geographical, cultural and social condition of Chhota Nagpur, certain safeguards and definite arrangements were to be created. The demands for separate province, sub-province or suggestions for modified exclusion were mooted. The Memorandum submitted by the Chhota

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<sup>19</sup> *Simon Commission Report*; Vol. I; P. 160.

Nagpur Improvement Society (Chhota Nagpur Unnati Samaj) suggested, "That the aboriginal areas of the province, namely Chhota Nagpur together with the Santhal Pargana and the District of Sambalpur, be formed into a separate Province or sub-Province with a more direct and paternal form of administration."<sup>20</sup> Lois Van Hoecle, Catholic Bishop of Ranchi submitting before the Simon Commission in a Memorial, suggested, "The aboriginal races of Chhota Nagpur require the continued protection of the Civil Service to save them from losing lands they now cultivate and from the danger of being brought down to the degraded conditions ... They need that paternal protection also, to enable them to a higher degree of culture."<sup>21</sup> Rai Bahadur S.C. Ray who was elected a member of the provincial committee that sat with the Simon Commission was among the first to have suggested three alternative schemes, viz :-

- "(1) The separation of the aboriginal tracts from Bihar and their formation into a separate province under a sympathetic and well informed administrator directly subordinate to the Governor-General.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*; Vol. XVI; Cl.6; P. 437.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*; Vol. XVI; P. 434.

- (2) The formation of a separate province composed of the aboriginal tracts and the Oriya-speaking tracts, with certain safeguards for aboriginal interests.
- (3) Constituting the aboriginal tracts into a sub-province under a major province.”<sup>22</sup>

It was in the course of Simon Commission discussions with the deputations that the idea of separate province was not considered feasible on the ground of lack of revenue, personnel required for administration, level of education etc.<sup>23</sup> The suggestion for sub-province was also not considered viable for the same reason.<sup>24</sup> But the grievance expressed in the memorandum were noted, “We Chhota Nagpuris are painfully conscious of the fact that, ever since the constitution of the ‘reformed’ councils, Chhota Nagpuris have been receiving much less consideration or attention than they used to receive in ‘Pre-reform’ days.”<sup>25</sup> These grievances were to be addressed. Lois Van Hoeckle, Catholic Bishop of Ranchi re-inforced the same view by submitting, “Therefore we are ready to welcome any proposal which will efficiently safeguard their (aboriginals’) special land laws and customs, promote

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<sup>22</sup> Singh K.S.; *Tribal Society in India*; P. 107; Quoted from Simon Commission Report; Vol. III; Pp.554-556.

<sup>23</sup> *Simon Commission Report*; Vol. XVI, P. 448-449.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*; Vol. XVI, Cl. 24-36; P.449.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*; Vol. XVI; P. 437.

education among them and give them a simple and paternal way of settling their disputes.”<sup>26</sup>

The suggestions offered, as representing tribal aspirations as discussed above required a mechanism of safeguards which would minimize the apprehension of new reforms helping the new set-up to assume coercive powers to the disadvantage of the tribal communities. The Government of India Bill, 1935, opted for including Chhota Nagpur in the list of “partially excluded” area. Such a provision in the Bill invited opposition not from the tribals alone but also from Bihar and Orissa Assembly. A meeting of the Aboriginal Society held on 11<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> February, 1935, in Ranchi and attended by the aboriginals of all denominations of the Christian Converts (Anglicans, Lutherans, Catholics etc.) and non-Christians passed a resolution pleading not to lower the status of the region by declaring it to be “Partially Excluded.”<sup>27</sup> A resolution echoing the same sentiments was also passed by a overwhelming majority.”<sup>28</sup> These resolutions were contested by the Government, Mr. Hubback speaking on governments’ behalf argued two basic points on the basis of latest census’ statistical data. He said :

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*; Vol. XVII; P. 434.

<sup>27</sup> *The Searchlight*; Patna; 17<sup>th</sup> February 1935; P.07.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*; February 20, 1935; P.04.

- (1) It could not be said that they (aboriginals) had attained the same standard of civilization as the other general population of the Division.
- (2) It was also clear that the aboriginals in Chhota Nagpur had not been absorbed in the general population.

Outlining the concept of “Excluded” and “Partially Excluded Area”, in British Parliament on India Bill Debate, Lord Eustace Percy suggested three broad principles in dealing with the aboriginal population in India, viz.; firstly, that wherever an area, however large or small contained a homogenous population without a large inter-mixture, the remainder of the population in such area should be either totally or partially excluded; secondly, that a Governor’s special responsibility towards aboriginal minorities which were not excluded should be clearly defined; and thirdly, that the Secretary of State should be empowered to add by an order-in-council other areas to the sixth schedule within two years of the operation of provincial autonomy.<sup>29</sup> In the same debate, Mr. Butler, the then Under Secretary of State for India, tried to clarify government’s position by stating: “We do not deny for a moment the importance of special measures for these areas, but if we have to choose between assimilation and segregation we unhesitatingly choose assimilation.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*; February 20, 1935; P.07.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*; May 17, 1935; P. 04.

He further expressed the opinion that it would be disastrous to take steps which might alienate the opinion of the advanced communities whom the Government wished to persuade to take an interest in the welfare of the backward tribes.<sup>31</sup> The Indian National Congress in its Faizpur Session expressed its opinion on the issue in following terms:

“This Congress is further of opinion that this separation of these excluded and partially excluded areas is intended to leave out of popular control, the disposition and exploitation of the mineral and forest wealth in those areas and to keep the inhabitants of these apart from India for their easier exploitation and suppression. This Congress holds that the same level of democratic and self-governing institutions should be applicable to all parts of India without any distinction.”<sup>32</sup>

### **The Adibasi Sabha’s Agenda : Separate Province**

While the debate on the question of “Partial Exclusion”, seems to have invited the attention of the intelligentsia which mainly included anthropologists and administrators, the question of separate province was not allowed to subside even when it was rejected for its impracticality and unviability. The Adibasi Sabha, under the leadership of Jaipal Singh did not

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Singh K.S.; *Tribal Society in India*; P.112.



appear to have involved itself in the “Excluded-Partially Excluded” Area debate; at any point of time, instead, it went ahead to spearhead a “separate province” movement supposedly with the backing of Christian Missionaries and the Bengalis who most probably saw the increasing domination of Biharis in the provincial politics as a threat of their already entrenched position. The Congress leadership appeared to have expressed its suspicion regarding the intentions of Jaipal Singh and the backing enjoyed by Adibasi Sabha. On the prevailing situation, A.V. Thakkar wrote to Srikrishna Sinha, PM of Bihar suggesting, “As the Adibasi movement, started by both the Hindu and Christian aborigines and supported by Bengalis for their selfish motives, is gaining ground day by day, it becomes doubly the duty of the Bihar Government to launch a very big scheme for their advancement inspite of their working against the Bihar Government.”<sup>33</sup>

The confidential report of Hallet, the then Governor of Bihar, to the Governor General regarding the movement for separate province gives his understanding of the composition and nature of the movement. He wrote, “My Government would probably say that it was organized by Bengalis, as a result of Bengali–Bihari controversy; the Bengalis may have taken some part in it, but the most significant feature is that this is the first occasion that I know of

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<sup>33</sup> *Dr. Rajendra Prasad selected correspondence*; Valmiki Chowdhary (ed); Vol. III; From A.V Thakkar To Srikrishna Sinha, PM, Bihar; 15<sup>th</sup> Aprill, 1939; P. 234.

on which the Christian and pagan aborigines have combined together. I hope that owing to the influence of missionaries it will keep on right track.”<sup>34</sup> While Hallet saw the movement as coming together of Christian and non-Christian aborigines, Congress insisted to dub it as purely Christian missionary affair with some Bengali backing. The differing interpretations of the movement with regard to its composition and nature saw the Governor and the Congress Ministry adopting opposite positions on the question. The Congress Ministry went to the extent of deletion and addition in the official reports. In one of the interesting account, Hallet writes, “The original draft was that a conference at Ranchi, was attended by 20,000 people mostly aboringinals; the Parliamentary Secretary altered this by saying, ‘mostly Christian aboriginals from Ranchi District.”<sup>35</sup> The Congress Prime Minister (the present Chief Minister was known as Prime Minister at that time) even went to the extent of complaining to the governor, of the non-co-operation of the officials in dealing with the adibasi movment in Chhota Nagpur. Hallet whose view differed from that of the PM, attempted to defend the officials, saying, “The Adibasi movement in Chhota Nagpur seems to me to be entirely unobjectionable and so far as I know, is being conducted on constitutional lines. To charge missionaries with

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<sup>34</sup> Linlithgow Collection; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library; (NMML) New Delhi, Letters from Hallet, Governor of Bihar; 28<sup>th</sup> June 1939.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*; February; 16<sup>th</sup>, 1939.

exceeding their function by supporting a movement for the uplift of the aboriginals was unreasonable, still less reasonable is to change Government officers with failing to take action against a movement which as far as the information went was reasonable.”<sup>36</sup> It seems that the PM was not willing to heed to such arguments as he vehemently insisted for the transfer of the DC, Ranchi, driving Hallet to desperation: “I am afraid therefore that the policy of my Government may cause the movement to become more definitely anti-Hindu and I’ll watch this point very carefully.”<sup>37</sup> In the same letter Hallet attempts to account his views as to how the movement was able to galvanise support. He attributes Bengali-Bihari controversy to the growth of Bihari, Oriya, Chhota Nagpuri and other kinds of sectional identities and says Missionaries are not openly supportive to the demand of separation but sympathizes with the same. He also noted the presence of non-Christian aboriginals who are opposed to Hindu / Dikku.<sup>38</sup>

On the issue of separate province, the Congress Ministry in its categorical position akin to the Simon Commission Report, sought to dismiss the demand as unpractical and unviable in every respect. To a question put up by Dr. Sacrchidanand Sinha in the Bihar assembly regarding the question of

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*; *Ibid*, February 16<sup>th</sup>, 1939.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*; April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1939.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*.

separation, K.B. Sahay, the then Parliamentary Secretary replied that the question in its historical, administrative, economic, financial and political aspects, was not feasible.<sup>39</sup> K.B. Sahay pointed out the problem inherent in the role of protector and guarantor of tribals' rights. He stated, "It would not be surprising if on its being separated the people of the area in general and the aborigines in particular became victims of exploiters and adventurers, which would constitute a grave political menace to the peace and prosperity of this area."<sup>40</sup> Hallet seems to have avoided any confrontation on the issue, although he appeared sympathetic to the movement and even attempted to justify the movement as representative of the tribal aspirations; nevertheless he was of the opinion, "The demand for a separate province of Chhota Nagpur seems to me entirely out of question and I feel if my ministers pay attention to the aboriginals of that area, as they are doing, we may escape any trouble."<sup>41</sup>

### **Congress & The Bureaucracy's views on the Adibasi Agenda**

The western educated intelligentsia gradually evolved a consensus around the colonial project centered around either 'civilizing' the 'aboriginals' or to pursue the 'developmental- model' supposed to 'liberate' the hitherto

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*; Letter from Thomas Stewart; Governor of Bihar; 28<sup>th</sup> June 1938.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*; Letter from Hallet, Governor of Bihar to Governor General; Jan 28<sup>th</sup>, 1939.

'backward' tribals. The introduction of modern institutions in the area were supposed to be the harbingers of 'development' and hitherto existing indigenous and local socio-political institutions were despised and held responsible for 'changelessness' and 'backwardness' of the tribal society. It is apparent that the thinkers of all hues sought to uplift the tribals and ameliorate their condition by proposing to impose their own model of 'development'. It may also be justifiably said that all these developmental models were rooted in a particular kind of theoretical understanding, apparently differing on certain aspects, but essentially constituted of modernizing elements.

The prevailing intellectual environment of the time had produced a system of knowledge under the impact of certain colonial constructs and stereotypes. "Isolationism or assimilationism, therefore, appear to owe its inspiration either to the supposedly queer academic interest of the anthropologists or the British administrators. It is very largely a matter of opinion as to the best way of preserving the vitality of the tribal people, only secondarily complicated by other considerations."<sup>42</sup> The formation of opinions in 'favour' of the tribals legitimized the categories of "backward Vs. developed" thereby exhorting the colonial state to further intrude into the tribal

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<sup>42</sup> Ghurye, G.S., *The Scheduled Tribes*, p. 161.

regions through proliferation of modern institutions covering almost every aspect of tribal life.

The widening of the space for colonial state in the realm of tribal life saw in reciprocation to a certain extent the formation of tribal consciousness, attempts at constituting tribal identity and tendency towards 'tribal' self-assertion in the socio-political landscape. The modes of protests hitherto adopted by the tribals in the form of violent upsurge, insurrections and revolts gave way to a new form of political mobilization. The mode of political mobilization was determined by a different kind of tribal aspiration akin to the trends influenced by modernity and increasing willingness of the tribals to engage with the colonial state in pursuance of the fulfillment of its demands. This shift was largely an outcome of the ongoing process of social change heralded by the coming up of a number of societies and organizations of various hues at the ground level centred around the question of tribal identity and finding enthusiastic supporters among the upcoming tribal middle class. The political agenda articulated by different tribal organizations included demands for educational upliftment, scholarships, restoration of forest rights, facilities for irrigation, reduction of rent, reservation in Government jobs, adibasi representation on various foras like legislatures etc. It will not be unjustified to say that even the demand for separate province of Chhota Nagpur

and Santhal Pargana not only focussed on the question of tribal identity but it was also sought to be substantiated on the ground of economic, political, social and cultural aspirations of the tribal population.

The coming up of tribal organizations and shift in their mobilization techniques in a way represented the willingness on their part to engage with the colonial state under the framework of the modern system which the colonial rulers were seeking to establish. The formulation of the demands, and its contents, too, reflected the changing aspirations of the tribals. The colonial policy makers appear to be keen to encourage such trends among the tribals and support of Hallet, the then Governor of Bihar to the activities of Adibasi Sabha is probably motivated by such consideration. Setting aside all objections raised by the Congress Ministry in Bihar, Mr. Hallet continued to maintain repeatedly that, “the Adibasi Movement in Chhota Nagpur seems to me to be entirely unobjectionable and as far as I know, is being conducted on constitutional lines.”<sup>43</sup> It may have perhaps suited the colonial rulers to encourage Adibasi Sabha as a political counterpoint to the Congress Ministry, but it may not be completely denied that the Adibasi Sabha was instrumental in giving expression to the theme of tribal identity in political form. The colonial

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<sup>43</sup> *Linlithgow Collections*; Mirofilm, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi; Letter from Hallett to Lord Linlithgow, Feb 16<sup>th</sup>, 1939, p. 24 and other subsequent letters.

rulers were seemingly inclined favourably towards extending their sympathies, if not support, as such developments appeared to them positive and in consonance with the colonial understanding.

Though, the issue of separate province found no favour with either the colonialists or the Congress Ministry, the demand for the same was understood to be legitimate by the British. Perhaps, the British saw in it the willingness on the part of the tribals to adhere to the constitutional system and making space for themselves in that system. If that was so, why did the British reject categorically the demand for separate province? The colonial policy makers were convinced of the difficulty owing to the ground reality and impracticality involved in favouring the demand for separate province. Secondly, the argument extended against the demand for separate province was non-attainment of the desired standards required to run a province. Dr. Kennedy, a member of the Simon Commission expressed this views to which other members including the chairman and members of various deputations concurred in following terms: "At present I do not think on the whole that they are sufficiently developed to run a separate province without some outside help ... You would have a certain number of people, some might be enthusiasts, others might be adventurers, who would hold a great many of the offices and



posts in the country. At the present stage of development they cannot get on with filling these administrative posts by aboriginals.<sup>44</sup>

### **The Outcome of the Controversies: A Policy**

The rejection of the demands for separate province was to be replaced by a workable proposition. The colonialists were not unwilling to take up the responsibility to look out for a mechanism which could have satisfied the apprehension of the continuance of 'oppressive regime' in the case the elected Governments took over control. The provision of backward tracts incorporated in Government of India Act, 1919; had mainly the same idea of extending protection to this 'vulnerable' section of the society. The apprehension that the interests of the tribals might be neglected in case the provincial Government (Bihar in this case) was placed under popular control, was repeatedly expressed and considered to be genuine by the colonial policy makers.<sup>45</sup> It may still be debated as to how far such apprehensions were legitimized by the colonial policy makers, as under the modified exclusion provision of backward tract regarding Chhota Nagpur, in the Government of India Act, 1919, the ministers were allowed to exercise authority over

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<sup>44</sup> *Simon Commission Report*, Vol. XVI, Cl. 21, p. 448.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

transferred subjects.<sup>46</sup> It seems that the colonial policy makers wished to secure their position as guarantor of tribal rights and interests and reserve for themselves the space of supreme arbitrator in situations of controversy and dispute.

The concept of Excluded or Partially Excluded Area may be located in the framework of above-mentioned policy. Perhaps, in contemplation of a system of safeguards and protection to tribal rights and interests such policy was mooted. Interestingly, the arguments in support of the Excluded-Partially Excluded Area provision were the same which formed the basis for the rejection of the demand for separate province. It was assumed by the British policy makers that the interests of tribals and non-tribals were necessarily conflicting and hostile. Such views further strengthened the apprehension of exploitation and oppression of tribals by non-tribals, who were supposed to appropriate the system when government was to be placed under popular control. Tribals, being 'backward' and not having attained the 'civilizational'

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<sup>46</sup> Under the Government of India Act, 1919, the subjects of administration were divided into *transferred* and *reserved* in the Provincial level. The *transferred* subjects were to be administered by the Governor with the aid of Ministers responsible to Legislative Council. The *reserved* subjects on the other hand were to be administered by the Governor and his Executive Council without any responsibility to the legislature. In the case of Bihar, the Ministers enjoyed authority over *transferred* subjects in the *backward-tracts* also under the provision of *modified exclusion*. In other *backward-tracts* which were *totally excluded* no such authority was enjoyed by Ministers responsible to the legislature.

standards needed such policies of safeguards and protection in the face of the 'oppressive tendencies' of the non-tribals. The Excluded-Partially Excluded Area arrangement was supposedly a defense- mechanism against such foreseeable apprehensions.

The ambivalence in the colonial policy-makers approach was that while arguing as above, they also occasionally inclined to favour the integrationist line of thinking. Mr. Butler, the Under Secretary of State for India was categorical in expressing British Government's views favouring the participation of non-tribal advanced community in the upliftment of the tribals.<sup>47</sup> "The Government, he said, was convinced that the insistence on the policy of wholesale segregation was not likely to confer any benefit commensurate with the dissatisfaction it would cause."<sup>48</sup> Though, the colonial understanding of the time seems to have seen tribal regions as "isolates", nevertheless, the practical socio-political condition on the ground made them argue against the policy of segregation. The colonial institutions which they introduced or intended to introduce in the tribal societies so as to bring them at parity with the advanced non-tribal society required the active participation of the 'advanced' communities to make these institutions workable. There was on

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<sup>47</sup> *The Searchlight*; Friday- May, 17, 1935; p.04

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

the ground already existing tribal–non-tribal relationship imbued with cultural affinities, commonality of interests and systems of intercommunity relationship.

The colonial state was perceived as paternal in content and action. A Memorial submitted to Simon Commission by the Catholic Bishop of Ranchi claiming to represent the Catholic aborigines of Chhota Nagpur, says “The aboriginal races of Chhota Nagpur required the continued protection of the Civil Services... They need that *paternal protection* also, to enable them to rise to a higher degree of culture.”<sup>49</sup> A deputation from Chhota Nahgpur Improvement Society to the Simon Commission expressed its opinion in following terms, “We would like a popular government to as much as we would have a representative system of Government, by an elective method and a *paternal* one in the sense that the government and other officials of government should be in more direct and sympathetic touch with the people.”<sup>50</sup> Hallet, the then Governor of Bihar, in pursuance of similar policies, defended the activities of Adibasi Sabha even to the chagrin of Congress Ministry. In attempting to extend ‘*paternal-protection*’, the colonial policy makers considered it fit to devise a mechanism of Excluded Partially Excluded Area. Most probably, such efforts on the part of the colonial policy makers were

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<sup>49</sup> *Simon Commission Report*, ; Vol. XVI; p. 43

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*; p. 454.

partly motivated by their understanding which located tribals as a distinct category and isolates, and also partly by their desire to reserve for themselves legitimate space to operate on the issues pertaining to tribal question.

## 2. CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES AND THE TRIBALS OF BIHAR

*“These Hindu rulers never cared to give any civilization in any form to the inhabitants of this land... Mohammedan governors left their subjects at the mercy of the Hindu Chiefs... Christian rulers were the good Samaritans to the Munda and Uraons of this province... they felt compassion on these people and brought them to the inn and gave them to the host, i.e. entrusted them to the care of the church and its ministers.. It is Christianity and Christianity, alone that has given a new impetus to the intellectual, social and moral uplift of this land.”<sup>1</sup>*

The Christian Missionaries, who took upon themselves the divine task of ‘civilizing’ the ‘Primitive’ tribal people by evangelizing and proselytizing them, thus rationalized and morally defended their own presence. The Christian Missionaries are considered as one of the most important component of socio-cultural change among the tribal people and instrumental

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<sup>1</sup> P. Hurad, ‘A short account of the work of the Gossner Society in Chhota Nagpur’, Paper read at the Diamond Jubilee of the Gossner Political Lutheran Church, Ranchi, Nov. 20, 1920, The Gospel Witness, Organ of the Lutheran Mission in India, December, 1920, pp. 70-71. [As quoted in Sangeeta Dasgupta’s *Reordering Tribal Worlds: Tana Bhagats, Missionaries And the Raj*; Ph.d. Thesis; p.95.]

in awakening their political consciousness. S.C. Roy writes that, “the two main channels through which western cultural influence reached the native people of Chhota Nagpur are first, the channel of British administration and British officials, and secondly, the channel of European Christian Missions, and Missionaries.”<sup>2</sup> The Christian Missionaries attempted to locate themselves in local environment by adapting their techniques to a certain extent within the tribal pattern. The contradiction of being looked upon as an alien and having a legitimate position of carrying their evangelizing and proselytizing works was sought to be resolved by creating and legitimising particular kinds of history, biblical traditions, myths and folklores.

In this chapter, we shall study some aspects of the activities of the Christian Missionaries, their mode of working, their perception of the tribal question, competition among them, their relationship with the Congress and the Adibasi Sabha and other social and political movements among the tribals. The Christian Missionaries, by virtue of their wide network, a large band of dedicated workers, and intellectual and financial resources at their command, were effectively placed to influence tribal societies in the region.

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<sup>2</sup> S.C. Roy; The Effect on The Aborigines of Chhota Nagpur of their contact with Western civilization; Pp. 362-78; *Journal of Bihar and Orissa Research society*; 1931.

## Coming of the Christian Missionaries

On the invitation of Captain Hannington, the then Commissioner of Chhota Nagpur Division, four Christian Missionaries arrived at Ranchi on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 1845.<sup>3</sup> These Missionaries were sent by Father Evangelist Gossner of Berlin in the year 1844.<sup>4</sup> These Missionaries namely, Messrs. E.Schatz, A. Brandt, F. Basch and Th. Janke laid the foundation of Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Mission (GEL Church) in Chhota Nagpur. Initially, they had to face adverse circumstances. They found it very difficult to find any convert. "They visited the people in their villages, they laboured in their own gardens to support themselves, they erected their own buildings; they were heedless of the changes of climate, and of intense heat of an Indian sun. One after another, four fell to sacrifice of exposure and over exertion. The zeal of the remaining missionaries did not flag. In 1850 the first fruits were gathered. That year they baptized 11 adults, the next 27, and each year the number increased."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> K. N. Sahay; *Under the Shadow of the Cross*; p. 44; Institute of Social Research and Applied Anthropology; Calcutta; Published 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid; p. 43.

<sup>5</sup> History of Christianity In India: With its Prospects. A Sketch Compiled from Sherring Smith; Badley, and Reports (Madra: 1895); p. 53 [As quoted in Sangeeta Das Gupta's *Reordering. Tribal World: Tana Bhagats, Missionaries, And The Raj*; Ph.D Thesis] p. 53.



Increasing number of converts encouraged these missionaries to build church in Ranchi in 1855. It was the first Church of Chhota Nagpur and was popularly called "The Church of Christ."<sup>6</sup> They started first religious school to train catechists and teachers in 1867 and thereafter also started co-educational schools.<sup>7</sup> Seeing the growth of the Lutheran Mission, a large number of German youths voluntarily opted to proceed to Ranchi but it resulted in the vision of the Lutheran Church. It led to the creation of Anglican Church (PG- Society For the Propagation of Gospel) when six hundred Lutherans joined it on the arrival of Anglican Bishop Milman in Ranchi.<sup>8</sup> The Lutherans and the Anglicans were able to build a remarkable network of schools imparting education to the tribals.

The Catholic (Roman Catholic Church) Mission was inspired by the suits of Belgium. Fr. Stockman, who arrived in Ranchi in 1869 is credited with the establishment of this mission. He was followed by Fr. De. Cock. Fr. Stevens who arrived in Chhota Nagpur in 1885 is credited with starting educational works and giving a solid foundation of the Catholic Church. Father Stevens is considered to be architect of the Catholic Mission in Chhota Nagpur

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*Nishkalanka*; September, 1938; vol XVIII; No-09; p. 173.

Ibid.

Ibid.

and has been called the Greatest Missionary since St. Francis Xavier on account of his amazingly large apostolate in Chhota Nagpur.”<sup>9</sup> He studied the local language, customs and manners and compiled a catechism in Hindi and composed hymns for Parishioners which were set on foreign tunes.<sup>10</sup> He was successful in winning a large number of converts also on account of his knowledge of the local agrarian problems which helped him to address agrarian grievances of the tribals against the local zamindars.<sup>11</sup>

The presence of these three important missions, viz. Lutheran, Anglican and Catholic did not in any way find them engaged in organizing co-ordinated activities, rather they remained embroiled in bitter competition. They never hesitated to win converts from among the followers of their adversaries. The tension, competition and conflict among them may be gleaned from their propaganda campaigns.<sup>12</sup> “The majority of converts which Fr. Lievens made at Torpa were among the Lutheran Christians, and sometimes the Father had to face opposition and embarrassment from the Lutheran pastors. He was called

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<sup>9</sup> K. N. Sahay; *Under the Shadow of the Cross*; p. 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid; pp. 47-52.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> *Nishkalaka*; August 1934; Vol. XIV, No-08; Hamare Mission Ke Bare Kya Kahte Hain? (What they say about our mission?) pp.141-143.

the missionary of the devils".<sup>13</sup> We also find a series of article by Fr. Henry S.J. in Nishkalanka between February, 1931 and January, 1932, demonizing Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran order.<sup>14</sup>

That these missions were locked in stiff competition among themselves is evident from the way they liberally showered abuses, strong criticism and mocked each other publicly. Their distaste for each other was so intense that they appear soft and cautious in criticizing non-Christians and local cults in comparison to the harsh language they used against each other.

### **Missionaries and their Modes of Social Control**

On their arrival in Chhota Nagpur, the missionaries had to adjust to the local language, culture, religious practices, life style, social institutions and political mechanism. The forested terrain of Chhota Nagpur where the tribals had sheltered themselves in small villages had evolved cultures, institutions, traditions, socio-political mechanism etc. compatible with their environment. The missionaries appeared to them strangers, hence making it difficult for them to win converts. As it has been already stated that the missionaries had to wait for four long years to get their first convert, it became imperative for the

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<sup>13</sup> K. N. Sahay; *Under the Shadow of the Cross*; p.50.

<sup>14</sup> *Nishkalanka*; Luther; February 1931 to January 1932; Dialogue between Anthony and Joseph.

missionaries to lay solid foundation for their future work by pursuing strategies fit to enlarge their scope. The local conditions, too, required a mode of functioning which made them relevant and an important component of the tribal. The first batch of missionaries which felt badly discouraged in the beginning and asked Fr. Gossner to assign some other place for their work, were advised, “if the people do not receive the words for their salvation then preach to them for their condemnation”.<sup>15</sup>

The Missionaries attempted to evolve a mechanism of social control so as to make broader space for evangelization and proselytization. To gain legitimacy for Missionaries’ project and to impute a sense of self pride for being a Christian, the tribal culture and society was required to be despised and condemned. The ‘superiority’ of the Christian culture had to be established only by pushing the tribal tradition and customs on defensive.

The Catholic Mission sought to organize the Catholic tribals through a number of Catholic Sabhas. These Catholic Sabhas functioned as modern voluntary associations and they had their written rules and regulations, registered in accordance with the law of the land.<sup>16</sup> These Catholic Sabhas also

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<sup>15</sup> K. N. Sahay; *Under the Shadow of the Cross*; p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> *Nishkalanka*; Vol. XII; No.02; February 1932; pp.40-44.

functioned as local panchayats and attempted to regulate and control the lives of the Catholic converts.

The missionaries appear to be completely opposed to the tribal dance, fairs and festivals, their preference for drinks especially “Hanria” (a local liquor), their ‘licentiousness’, etc. It seems that the attraction for the traditional dance and festivals proved an impediment for the missionaries in retaining their hold over the tribals. The local traditions and customs tended to revert the converted tribals to their original indigenous cultural practices and beliefs. The cultural challenge posed by the tribal society may be understood from the following account.

*“What do we see in Chhota Nagpur. Everyone has received the message of the true religion of Lord Christ. But what do we see? Many people are not ready to accept this religion and want to remain fundamentalist and worldly persons. Some people have given themselves to be Christian, but neither they learn religion, nor got baptized, nor do pray; it seems their hearts have dried. They do nothing to get into heaven. Some people have learnt the religion, got themselves baptized ‘but’ thereafter owing to problems in their marriages or due to fascination towards the world, have left the religion. They have become bastards.”<sup>17</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> Nishkalanka; June 1931; Vol. XI, No-06; “Sahayak Kripa”, P. 136 (Translation my own)

It may not be inappropriate to say that the indigenous tribal culture posed a serious challenge to the aspirations of the missionaries. A process of retroversion was to be arrested and any tendency towards its proliferation was to be checked so as to rescue the converted tribals from the danger of being co-opted within the indigenous tribal culture. A mechanism of social control was sought to be evolved. Drinking “Hanria”, Akhra Dance, other games and dances like Jatra, Jadur Karma, Bhatanga, ‘worldly’ songs etc, were strongly disapproved.<sup>18</sup> Any converted tribal found participating in these ‘lowly’ and ‘worldly’ activities was to be fined in accordance with the decision of the Catholic Sabha.<sup>19</sup> The missionaries also sought to control the institution of marriage which has hitherto functioned in accordance with the tribal customs and traditions wherein the bride and groom enjoyed considerable amount of independence in choosing their life partners. The rules and regulations conducting marriage among the converted tribals were so framed that the missionaries assumed controlling position.<sup>20</sup> The distaste for the tribal dances was so strong that the missionaries did not hesitate to approve the use of force, where they were in position to do so, in stopping these tribal dance and local

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<sup>18</sup> *Nishkalanka*; November, 1921; vol-I, No-10; pp.107-108.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid; “Shadi Ke Vishay Me” (Regarding Marriage)

celebrations.<sup>21</sup> Intensive propagandas were resorted to against these dance, celebrations, customs and beliefs. One such example is as follows:—

*“What is this shameless dance? In answer to this question, religious scholars have said \_\_\_\_\_ it is a shit of lechery! What is this shameless dance? \_\_\_\_\_ it is a circle at the centre of which there is satan and his slaves go round him in his steps! What is this shameless dance? It is a market of impurity, a school of impurity! What is this shameless dance? It is a rock that smashes sinlessness and a grave of shame! Who can remain pure by dancing the whole night! No one!”<sup>22</sup>*

The Christian missionaries sought to create a mechanism of social control so as to keep the converted tribals within their fold. It required the establishment of the superiority of the Christian values and beliefs vis-a-vis that of the tribals. In doing so, it became necessary for them to portray the tribal practices, traditions and customs inferior and incompatible with their socio-economic and political advancement as the missionaries conceived it.

### **Local response to missionary challenge**

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<sup>21</sup> *Nishkalanka*; July 1922; vol;II; no-07; pp79-80.

<sup>22</sup> *Nishkalanka*; January 1931; vol XI; no-01; p 17 (Translation my own)

The activities of the Christian Missionaries were responded to in diverse ways. In 1930s we find Haribaba movement, activities of Congress, Arya Samaj etc. posing challenge to the Christian Missionaries on different planes. Such movements were articulated in local idioms, thus becoming more intelligible to the tribals and making the converted tribals to revert to their indigenous culture and beliefs.

The Haribaba Movement was identified with the Hindu's attempts to check the increasing influence of the missionaries.<sup>23</sup> This movement was reported as something associated with witchcraft, sorcery, magic and occultism, and therefore led by 'frauds' to beguile the simple tribals.<sup>24</sup> This movement was seen as posing a serious threat. The Catholic Sabhas continued to discuss ways to check the influence of Hribaba. The Catholic Sabhas mostly resolved in following terms: —

*"The place where the preachings of Haribaba have not reached, precautionary measures should be taken. The masters and Panchs should remember that they should meet their worldly brothers with love and affection and the foolishness, loss and risk involved in Haribaba religion be*

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<sup>23</sup> *Nishkalanka*; December 1931; vol-XI; no-12; pp. 266-268.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*; January 1932; Vol XII, no-01; "Haribaba Tarachand" by Mikhail Lugun; pp 6-11.



*exposed.”<sup>25</sup> The tribals were also reminded of the way they were ‘cheated’ by Tana Bhagat movement\_\_\_\_ “Some years ago, a certain imposter had asked you to sell away your cow-oxen, ram-goat, hen-cock and all other domestic animals and aves and to worship Tana-Mai.....Many foolish people misled by him sold all those animals and started worshipping Tana Mai. After a few days, their starved bodies and dying children revealed what kind of regime the Tana Mai had.”<sup>26</sup>*

The missionary activities in Chhota Nagpur also invited the attention of Arya Samaj. The Arya Samaj sought to unleash an intense propaganda against the Christian missionaries activities. These propaganda campaigns to a certain extent caused suspicion in the minds of the tribals about the intentions of the missionaries. The Arya Samaj attempted to create tribal consciousness and Hindu consciousness simultaneously and tribal identity was sought to be made synonymous with Hindu identity. “One who is an aboriginal<sup>27</sup> is always a Hindu and he only follows Hindu customs and traditions.”<sup>28</sup> “Christians are

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid; November 1932; vol-x; No-12; Navatoli, Catholic Sabha Meeting; 14<sup>th</sup> June 1932; pp-254-255 (Translation my own)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid; June, 1939; vol. XIX, No-06; p. 110. (Translation my own)

<sup>27</sup> The term “aboriginal” was in vogue in place of the term “tribal”.

<sup>28</sup> *Nishkalanka*; October 1940; Vol. XX; No-11; “Kuchh Sawal Jawab”; p. 187; (Translation my own)

neither aboriginals nor they have the right to be called so.”<sup>29</sup> Such kind of campaign surely posed serious challenge to the missionaries.

The “Hindu-Tribal” identity was supposedly counterpoised to the “Christian” identity. It was argued that on becoming Christian, the age-old indigenous culture gets polluted and shattered cutting a person off from his roots.<sup>30</sup> It was ‘alleged’ that the Christians did not worship gods and goddess neither did they have “Chundi” and by becoming a Christian, a person defiled and insulted the name and fame of his forefathers.<sup>31</sup> In a rather aggressive tone an impression was sought to be created that the missionaries convert the tribals by bribing and misleading them<sup>32</sup> and it was seen that the time had come to convert the Christians through “Shuddhi”.<sup>33</sup> The Arya Samaj also endeavoured to counter the theory of Aryan invasion saying, “Aryans did not come from outside but have been always living side-by-side with the aboriginals, and never had any fight with them.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid; p. 188.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid; p. 189.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

The Christian Missionaries had already been seeking to project an “aboriginal identity” distinct from “Hindu identity”. There developed a sense of pride in being called “adivasi”. The “adivasi” identity was supposed to cover Christian and non-Christian tribals within a single group vis-a-vis non-tribals. The message was clear \_\_\_\_ “I am proud to be an adivasi. I am also proud of my ‘worldly’ (non-Christian tribals) brothers. They were there before the coming of Hindus... then how come they are Hindu? We are ashamed of being called Hindu... because the meaning of our being called Hindus is to leave our superior position and get relegated to the lower caste of Hindus along with chamars and doms.”<sup>35</sup> The missionaries had their own logic as to why Hindus wanted to increase their numbers by calling the tribals as Hindus. According to them the reason had also a political dimension: “if all the ‘worldly’ aboriginals of Chhota Nagpur are counted as Hindus, then where is the space for “modified exclusion”. (Backward-Tract Provision Under Government of India Act, 1919) Once this protection is gone, we are doomed. Hindu leaders are not that selfless that they will do anything for the welfare of aboriginals.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Nishkalanka*; September, 1935; Vol. XV, no.09; “Kya Adivasi Hindu Hain?” by E. Hilan Oraon; pp 157-159 (translation my own)

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*; “Editor’s Comment”.

The missionaries discovered the caste system among Hindus as its weakest link. The practice of untouchability was also regarded as one of the glaring example of intolerance and inequality prevalent in the Hindu society. Though, Mahatma Gandhi's campaign against untouchability was cautiously applauded<sup>37</sup> his techniques of fast and satyagraha were disapproved as contrary to Christian values and ethos.<sup>38</sup> The missionaries appear to be suspicious towards Mahatma Gandhi's campaign against untouchability and welfare of the lower castes. They doubted his intentions and even expressed it openly: "Mahatma Gandhi is nowadays touring too much. Why? For the welfare of harijans (a term coined by him only) and in the name of social justice. But it is not hidden from anyone that he actually wants to increase the numbers of Hindus. Increased numbers will help him to realize his political agenda. Anyway, real risk lies in the fact that the untouchables who wanted to become Christians have now stopped from converting."<sup>39</sup> Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Ranchi in 1934 occasioned the criticism that he had not raised tribal issues.<sup>40</sup> The missionaries, however, saw Gandhi's attempt to undermine caste system

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<sup>37</sup> *Nishkalanka*; December 1932; vol XXV, no-12; p. 284.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, p. 285.

<sup>39</sup> *Nishkalanka*; July, 1934; vol .XIV, No. 07; "Mission Ki Arji- That the Indian Aborigines and untouchables Quickly come to Christ"; pp. 127-128.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*.

as a boon in disguise.<sup>41</sup> The caste system was considered a major impediment in the path of proselytisation, as according to the missionaries, “it was due to the fear of their own castemen that the Hindus were reluctant to accept Christianity, and, Gandhi was actually laying foundation for the future expansion of Christianity.”<sup>42</sup>

The missionaries considered the tribal region of Bihar to be “Dharma-Pradesh”<sup>43</sup> and therefore they had rightfully assumed the role of ‘ameliorating’ the condition of tribals through their evangelization and proselytisation activities. They upheld a notion of the superiority of Christian religion over other religions and unhesitatingly rejected any theorization mooted the ideas of equality of all religions.<sup>44</sup>

### **Missionaries vis-à-vis Congress and Adibasi Sabha**

The Christian missionaries seem to be positively disposed towards the colonial state. The British were portrayed as benevolent rulers who ought safeguarded and promoted the interests of the tribals. The rule of “Angrez

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<sup>41</sup> *Nishkalanka*; April, 1933; vol. XIII; No. 04; pp. 63-65.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Nishkalanka*; February, 1935; Vol. XV; No. 04; “Sriman Oscar Sevryr ka Dharma Patra”; pp 43-47.

<sup>44</sup> *Nishkalanka*; November 1934; Vol. XIV; no-11; “Sab Dharma Ek Hai”; Pp-215-216.

Bhahadur” was the harbinger of peace.<sup>45</sup> The colonial rulers were also credited for addressing the agrarian problems of the tribals.<sup>46</sup> The tribals were presented as loyalists of British Government, who had shown their unflinching loyalty, during Gandhi’s Civil Disobedience, Movement and the Second World War.<sup>47</sup> It seems that the missionaries were following their avowed policy of reverence to authority.<sup>48</sup>

The Communists were despised and bitterly opposed. Even the negligible presence of the communists in the region did not deter the missionaries from launching aggressive campaign against them.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, the policies of the Congress were bitterly criticized in the guise opposing Communism.<sup>50</sup> The Missionaries viewed the Congress activities with suspicion since it was against the Christians.<sup>51</sup> The March, 1939, editorial of *Nishkalanka*, states, supposedly “the policy of the congress is to stay neutral in religion related issues. If ground level congressmen are criticizing Christian religion by breaking congress’ neutrality, then they are harming congress’

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<sup>45</sup> *Nishkalanka*; February, 1932; Vol. XII; no.-02; p. 02.

<sup>46</sup> *Nishkalanka*; September, 1932; Vol. XII; No. 09- p. 174.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> *Chhota Nagpur Mission Letters*; April, 1930; “The Vatican and Mr. Gandhi” \_\_\_ A Report.

<sup>49</sup> *Nishkalanka*; June, 1939 to February 1940; vol. XIX ; no. 06; vol XX, no. 02.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> *Nishkalanka*; March, 1939; Vol. XII, No.02; p. 102.

interests and whatever the Muslim league says will stand true-that the congress is a Hindu party.”<sup>52</sup>

Though, the stated position of the missionaries was to stay above, partisan politics<sup>53</sup>, they nevertheless wholeheartedly welcomed the formation of Adibasi Sabha. The Adibasi Sabha was considered as united forum of Catholic/non-Catholics, Christian/non-Christian tribals and seeking to represent their collective aspirations.<sup>54</sup> The relationship between the Catholic Sabha and the Adibasi Sabha was to be defined in the following terms; “As long as there was no unity among the aboriginals, the Catholic Sabha used to participate in political matters. Now, it seems that there is no such space as Adibasi Sabha will take up political matters in the name of aboriginals.”<sup>55</sup> It appears that the Christian Missionaries were inclined towards Adibasi Sabha and considered it be the legitimate representative of the tribals interests and aspirations. The success of Adibasi Sabha in the elections at the cost of the Congress appeared to them as a sign of increasing consolidation of the tribals. The results of the elections to the District Board were reported in the following terms: “In Ranchi District fifteen seats were gained by aboriginals and the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid; (Translation my own)

<sup>53</sup> *Nishkalanka*; December, 1939; vol. XIX, no. 12; public statemet of Catholic Sabha; p. 238.

<sup>54</sup> *Nishkalanka*; December, 1938; Vol. XVIII, no. 12, Editorial; p. 225.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid; (Translation my own)

Congress got only nine. The results would have been better but those from the Congress Party got the votes in their favour by misleading a large number of our foolish aboriginals. In Ranchi and other places, Muslims had also sided with the aboriginals and voted in the white box".<sup>56</sup>

It seems that the relationship between the Congress Ministry and the Christian Missionaries was also not comfortable. The Missionaries strongly protested against the statement of Srikrishna Sinha, PM, Bihar, in the Legislative Assembly saying that the missionaries in Chhota Nagpur were trying to increase their influence through political means.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, it was re-iterated that excepting Communism, the Catholic Church neither opposed nor supported any political party either in Chhota Nagpur or in any part of India.<sup>58</sup> It appears that the policies of the Congress Ministry had somewhat deprived the Christian Missionaries from facilities, concessions Monetary support etc. hitherto enjoyed by them. Moreover, it seems that the Congress Ministry preferred to focus its attention on non-Christian tribals as various Governmental schemes were solely earmarked for them and thereby distinguishing the non-Christian tribals from the Christian tribals. The Catholic

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<sup>56</sup> *Nishkalanka*; June, 1939; Vol. XIX; no. 06; P. 115 (Translation my own)

<sup>57</sup> *Nishkalanka*; March, 1939; Vol. XIX, No. 03; Catholic Sabha Resolution; p. 70.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



Sabha expressed its strong objection to this policy of what it called discrimination on religious ground by the government.<sup>59</sup> The missionary repeatedly raised the following demands:—

- (i) Equal opportunity for scholarship reserved for aborigines.
- (ii) Equal rights and rules for buying and selling property.
- (iii) Rice banks started by Government for aborigines must be at the disposal of the poor aborigines whether they be Christian or non-Christian.
- (iv) Adequate representation, free from any form of religious discrimination of the whole community on public boards and committees set up for educational, rural reconstruction and other similar purposes.
- (v) Equal financial support for equal efficiency in all recognized schools including Christian schools.”<sup>60</sup>

It is obvious that the Congress Ministry turned a deaf ear to all these demands. The Catholic Sabha sought to create the pressure of Christian public invoking them to action, “You all fight for your schools. Whenever the government or the District Board or the Municipality shows discrimination in

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<sup>59</sup> *Nishkalanka*; December, 1939; Vol. XIX; No. 12; “Public Statement of Catholic Sabha”; P. 236.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

extending support to your schools, raise your voice. It is your right. You all pay revenue and tax.”<sup>61</sup>

The missionaries also realized that the national movement under the leadership of the Congress had progressed significantly and had become a potent force. It was perhaps such realisation on the part of missionaries that led them to distance themselves from giving any impression of having any close links with the colonial state. It also realised that many persons in the Congress were opposed to Christian religion and proving major hindrance in the path of the Christian Missionaries.<sup>62</sup> Occasionally, in order to convince the Congress of its faith in the ongoing national movement, the missionaries even lent support to the demand of ‘Swaraj’.<sup>63</sup> “On seeing that we also want Swaraja and we are true citizens and patriots, why will they trouble us”<sup>64</sup>; Thus missionaries were ready to support the nationalist aspiration so as to dilute any opposition to Christianity.

## CONCLUSION

The missionaries’ strategy was perhaps aimed at securing a legitimate space for themselves and to rescue their mission from the dangers

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<sup>61</sup> *Nishkalanka*; March, 1939; Vol. XIX; No. 03; p. 70. (Translation my own)

<sup>62</sup> *Nishkalanka*; April, 1939; Vol. XIX; No. 04; p. 68.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

of possible alienation in a changing environment. It became imperative for the missionaries to construct a framework where the missionaries were able to play a crucial role. The coming of the missionaries in the “Dharma Pradesh” of Chhota Nagpur was to be portrayed as ‘divine’ intervention in the interests of the tribal population of the region. The tribals were, to be made aware of their golden past and the reason for their downfall mostly attributed to reasons, i.e. imposition of an oppressive system.

In the process of identity formation through re-assertion of tribal solidarity and in locating the tribals within national framework, the Christian chamber missionaries played an important role. The missionaries followed a flexible approach in locating its theoretical position within widest possible framework, sometimes contending and sometimes accommodating and adjusting with other constructs. Change in Missionaries’ position vis-a-vis colonial state and the national movement may be seen in this context. The missionaries desire to exercise social control, initiate the process of cultural and social change and even to fashion the political consciousness of tribals, were integral to their motive to make the tribal region their domain and having legitimate right to operate therein.

### 3. THE CONGRESS AND THE TRIBAL QUESTION

The Indian National Congress which remained in its formative phase while Birsa movement was going on (1890's) could do but little in later years when the socio-political consciousness of the tribal people was building up. The technique of 'satyagraha' i.e., the social action based on non-violence as propounded by Mahatma Gandhi and the Lok Shakti, i.e., people's collective will as the solvent of social ills could not take up the tribal question until very late. "The Adivasi problems, as such, did not claim his (Gandhi's) attention until the early 1940s, but he exercised the imagination of the tribal people, as of other segment of the rural community and his life and mission became known through the Adivasi welfare programmes implemented by a number of organizations. A good many social movements among the tribals were influenced by him."<sup>1</sup> It seems that the upliftment of harijans was of prime importance for Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress, hence we find the tribal question relegated to the background. Gandhiji writes to Thakkar Bapa — "Do not forget that the religion of untouchability is today being sanctioned as religion. This is not so in the case of Adivasis. I do not mind therefore you

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<sup>1</sup> L.P. Vidyarthi (ed) *Gandhi and Social-Sciences*, chapter by K.S. Singh: The Mahatma And Adivasi, p. 122.

dedicating yourself to the service of Adivasis but must not be at the cost of the Harijans.”<sup>2</sup> Even upto December 1941, we don’t find any mention of the tribal welfare in the 13-point reconstruction programme drawn up by Mahatma Gandhi but by January 1942, the tribal welfare programme was added as 14<sup>th</sup> point in the reconstruction programme. At the same time we find the congressmen of Bihar non-committal to the tribal question and even the issues raised by the local tribal organisations not finding place of importance in the agenda of Bihar Congress or the Congress Ministry in Bihar between 1937-‘39.

In this chapter, I will attempt to study the Congress’ response to the prevalent “discourse on the tribal issue”<sup>3</sup> which the anthropologists, administrators, ethnographers and other academicians were seeking to establish, the mode of mobilisation of the tribals by the Congress workers at ground level, a brief account of the civil disobedience movement, Congress’ relations with Adibasi Sabha and Christian missionaries, and the work of the Congress Ministry between 1937 and 1939.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Pyarelal, Bapa To Bapu, p. 81-82 (quoted).

<sup>3</sup> I am using the term “Tribal Discourse” to denote the then prevalent academic understanding arrived at by scholars of different disciplines. This discourse was typical for its colonial stereotypes, anthropological constructs, ideas of history and a whole set of dogmas and theories.

The call for non-cooperation started to effectively influence the tribals. "Their (tribals) active participation with Congress session started in December 1921 when the Gaya Session of the Congress was held at Gaya... for the first time about 60 Oraons and Mundas came from Chhota Nagpur to Gaya by 21<sup>st</sup> December to attend the Congress. After that about 400 aboriginal men and women went to Gaya on foot. Many Tana Bhagats came in a lorry under the leadership of Shri Gulab Tiwari. Ranchi district alone sent 800 people to attend the Gaya session of the Congress. Gaya Congress left a profound influence in the minds of the Tana Bhagats and other aboriginals who were for the first time initiated into the wider struggle of national freedom movement and had the occasions to rub their shoulders with the greatest of there times on a footing of equality."<sup>4</sup> The mass character of the non-cooperation movement made it possible for the Congress to spread its influence among the tribals of Bihar. The Congress which was hitherto confined to urban centres attempting to attract intelligentsia and elite section of society was able to initiate the process of building and consolidating its mass base even in the interior regions mainly owing to the call for non-cooperation movement. The non-cooperation movement provided an opportunity to the

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<sup>4</sup> S.P. Sinha; 'Gandhi's Impact on the Tribals of Chhota Nagpur, 1920-30'; p. 156; L.P. Vidyarthi (ed); *Gandhi and Social Sciences*.

Congress leadership to interact with a vast section of the people and mobilize them in support of the movement thereby making a space for them to express themselves by ensuring their direct participation. The impact of the movement may be understood from the note of the then Superintendent of Police, Ranchi, who wrote; “hitherto mostly people who concerned themselves with the movement were of the non-aboriginal classes, like : Baniyas, Marwaris, Gwalas, Kahars, etc. As long as these persons above were influenced, the situation would not be said to be serious but on 31<sup>st</sup> January 1921 we find Gulab Tiwary addressing a meeting of Oraons. On the 1<sup>st</sup> February we have Osman, the newly appointed Head Maulavi of Anjuman Islamia Madarsha, speaking in a general meeting of Oraons, Mundas, Bhariaks, Ghashis, all aboriginal and barbers, chamars and other non-aboriginal classes. Gulab Tiwary and Ram Tahal Brahamchari also addressed this meeting in which speeches were all on the subject of non-co-operation, from drink to boycott of anything European.”<sup>5</sup> The Superintendent of Police further states that they, “succeeded in arousing considerable excitement amongst their hearers.”<sup>6</sup> These Meetings aroused considerable enthusiasm among the tribals and they started responding to the calls of non-cooperation and their participation in public meetings alarmed the

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.; p. 152.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Superintendent of Police to recommend to the government “to extend Act X of 1911- seditious meetings Act to Ranchi district so that action under section 5 of that Act may be taken if necessary.”<sup>7</sup>

It does not appear, that the Congress was, at least explicitly, either able to or making definite attempts in the direction of formulating a well considered tribal policy of its own. The inroads made by the Congress in the tribal regions of Bihar in course of non-cooperation movement required to be cultivated and consolidated. That a coherent policy built around a tribal centric agenda and programme was needed to keep the Congress in constant touch with the tribal, cannot be doubted. Though, we find Congress workers engaged with social issues related to tribals from 1920s onwards, it does not seem that the tribal works were given precedence over various other social issues at hand. It may be said that the Congress did not appear to be inclined to prioritize tribal issues even in context of the tribal regions of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid; p. 153.



## **Tribal Discourse and the Congress**

The prevalent discourse constituted around the tribals by the anthropologists, administrators and other scholars interested in this area found ready acceptance among the congressmen. Probably, the Congress itself got swayed away by such discourses which was constructed and codified partly within imperialists perspective and partly under the influence of the prevalent academic environment. This tribal discourse, a product of such circumstances had assumed hegemonic significance appropriating for itself an uncontested space. The Congress which sought to operate within nationalistic framework by grouping together all the anti-imperialist forces, either could not see through the imperialist content of the discourse or possibly could hardly find any element of importance to be challenged and contested. Though we find the change of nomenclature from “Kalipraja” to “Ranipraja” in case of tribals of Gujarat,<sup>8</sup> the Congress probably lacked strategies to evolve an alternative discourse more suitable to its political programmes and actions. Perhaps, the Congress showed no hesitation in acquiescing to the theories of invasions and

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<sup>8</sup> “Why should you be called “black” people? We are all black, the God who coloured our skin being the same, and his brush being the same. You will be called Hillmen from today. Be you brave as the lions and tigers in the hills, so that none may cheat you, or oppress you, or violate your purity.” \_\_\_\_\_ Mahatma Gandhi’s Speech at Raniparaj conference, Vedichi, March 16, 1927; *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*; vol. XXIII; p. 162.

migrations, histories of various tribes based on strange correlations, corroborations and imaginations, emphasis on marking out the tribals as isolates and in constant conflict with non-tribals, and constructions and reconstructions of various kinds.

Although it appears that the Congress was not inclined to embroil itself in the prevalent tribal discourse and even probably showed its acceptance to the formulation of such kind of knowledge, it was able to develop its own method of mobilization among the tribals. The Congress had to rely on the internal debate of the tribal discourse or had to work out a methodology suited to its own nationalist framework. A discourse was to be created incorporating a language intelligible to the tribal masses, also shaping and representing their aspirations in simultaneity. Sangeeta Dasgupta analyses a dual process: “On the one hand, the nationalists adapted their politics to local conditions, refiguring thereby their slogans in locally cognizable categories, and conversely, the Tanas reinterpreted these messages that expressed tribal aspirations. Nationalist discourse and tribal utopia thereby acquired a social basic as it gave meaning to local initiative.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sangeeta Dasgupta; *Reordering Tribal Worlds: Tanas Bhagats, Missionaries and The Raj*; p. 254, Ph.D Thesis, JNU; Year not mentioned.

In seeking to establish and consolidate its base among the tribal regions of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana, Congress exhibited a sense of pragmatism to locate its techniques of mobilisation within the local socio-cultural environment. It also sometimes adopted the idioms akin to Medieval Bhakti movement which exercised continuous influence on the lives of a vast section of tribals.<sup>10</sup> Emphasis on non-violence, satyagraha, abstinence from drinks, cleanliness, Khaddar spinning, local panchayats etc. became the focal points of Congress campaign. Apart from mobilization through speeches and public meetings on the important political issues of the day, the tribals were also mobilized by re-creating myths and traditions and also attempting to anthropomorphize the image of Gandhi.<sup>11</sup> Congress workers, in all probability did not consider it inappropriate to adopt techniques akin to millenarian movements or to take recourse to rumours and myths in seeking to mobilize the tribals. Fr. E. Horney gives an interesting description of one such mobilization event by workers inspired by Gandhi, which he calls an exaggerated drama, a comedy, in following words:-

*As soon as the gathering is sufficiently large and as the  
"musicians" are tired of belabouring their drums or blowing their*

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<sup>10</sup> K.S. Singh; *The Mahatma and Adivasis*; L.P. Vidyarthi (ed.); *Gandhi and Social Sciences*; P. 127.

<sup>11</sup> Also see Shahid Aminu's *Gandhi As Mahatma*; Gorakhpur District, Eastern U.P., 1921-2; *Subaltern Studies*; vol. III; Rajjit Guha (ed.); Oxford University Press; New Dehi; Pub. 1984; Pp. 01-61.

*trumpets, the leader of our mountebanks stands forth and with a solemn gesture waves crowd and troupe (sic) into silence. He makes a solemn bow to the crowd, and without uttering a syllable he stoops, lies down, and applies his ear to the ground, the right ear, for the left wouldn't do. After a while he leaps up and in solemn tone delivers to the awe-struck audience the message which Gandhiji is sending through the underground sound waves. And the message is this : "Now at last we have purna swaraj! It is time, brethren to lead a much simpler life than we have done hitherto (sic). We must curtail our expenses all round. How shall we do that? By eating no longer any meat, above all no cow's meat and no pork; by giving up smoking, by making no longer any bloody sacrifices to the bongas (spirits). Indeed all the bongas are to be expelled from the land. Away with the Bongas!*

*At this all the seven disciples of Gandhiji break forth into a mad dance, all the while belabouring their drums and blowing their trumpets. They jump about and made the most unlikely contortions as if all bongas of Chhota Nagpur possessed them, until one of them, breaking through the wandering crowd runs away across the fields. And the leader of (sic) cry out: "Behold, there go the bongas: there they go! Let them go. They are gone, gone forever, gone never to come back again into the lands of ours.*

*Drops the curtain on the first act of the comedy. After a while, when the audience has had time to recover from its surprise, the leader of the chelas again calls for silence. Let no one utter a breath; he feels that the earth is alive with messages sent out by the great Mahatma, and once again he solemnly prostrates him self and applies his ear to mother earth. He opens and closes his eyes, his countenance expresses wonder, awe, joy, dread, whatever feelings he can counter first. Indeed the more grimances he makes, the greater the certitude that he does indeed hear the very accents of Gandhiji's voice. At last the full message, has been delivered and received; the Chela leaps in the air, cuts and fun capers with followers and then delivers the message: "Brethern, sons of Hindustan, the bongas have departed. To whom will you offer sacrifice in future? Not to the Bongas since they are gone, who will henceforth protect you against evil and sickness. (sic) who will look after your fields and your cattle?... The Hindu deotas would. They are greater than (sic) the bongas were... To them, you must offer milk, ghee, sweets and flowers. Henceforth, delivered from the bongas, you are Hindus."<sup>12</sup>*

The top leadership of the Congress or Mahatma Gandhi himself was not in any way directly associated with such propaganda campaign. Mahatma

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<sup>12</sup> Fr. E. Horney, 'Wireless at Sarwada', *Our Field*, 7<sup>th</sup> Year, No. 4, May, 1931, pp. 77-79 [As quoted in Sangeeta Dasgupta's *Reordering Tribal worlds' Tana Bhagats, Missionaries and The Raj*, pp. 261-262].

Gandhi even expressed his displeasure on several occasions.<sup>13</sup> But, the local Congress workers and enthusiast<sup>14</sup> found it convenient to coin their messages in local idioms which was not bereft of religious content. Even Mahatma Gandhi preferred to convey his message incorporated with the idioms of Ramayana and exhorting the name of Rama. In a speech at “Kalipraja” conference, Vedichi, on January 18, 1925, while emphasizing abstinence from drink, boycott of foreign cloths etc, he said, “get up early in the morning, rinse your mouth, wash your face, clean your teeth, remove the mucus of the eyes and take the name of Rama. Rama means God. Repeating Ramayana is a sovereign remedy. We must pray to him- O Rama ! let me stay pure and help me keep the vows I have taken at Vedichi.”<sup>15</sup>

It seems that the Congress was not primarily concerned about posing any intellectual challenge to the prevailing tribal discourse owing to its own limitations at the time, but, it also located its political discourse within the socio-cultural framework of the tribals.

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<sup>13</sup> Sangeeta Dasgupta, *Reordering Tribal Worlds : Tanas Bhagats, Missionaries and The Raj*; p. 263, Ph.D Thesis.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid; Fr. E. Horney calls them pseudo chelas of Gandhi.

<sup>15</sup> *The Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*; vol. XXVI, p. 22; The publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, Published, 1968.

## Civil Disobedience Movement and the Tribals

The leadership of the Civil Disobedience movement mostly in Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana remained in the hands of the non-tribals. While the impact of the Civil Disobedience Movement was considerably high in Bihar, incidents of tribals participating in the movement are also reported. The tribals participated in the public meetings and processions organised by the Congress in almost every area of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Partana.<sup>16</sup>

The arrest of Ramnarayan Sinha and K. B. Sahay for supporting a reform movement among the Santhal of Gumia led by Bangam Manjhi of Borobera gave a new impetus to the movement.<sup>17</sup> On the 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1930 about 210 Santhals took the sacred thread and the S.I. of Gumia reported to his authorities that the Santhals of his own area were inducing others to join the movement.<sup>18</sup>

Paharias in Hazaribagh favourably responded to the movement and the government apprehended that it may lead to worsening of the situation. To check the spread of the movement the government proceeded against Pandra

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<sup>16</sup> K K Datta: *History of the Freedom Movement in Bihar*; Vol. II, Pub, July, 1957; Government of Bihar, Patna, pp. 65-134.

<sup>17</sup> *The Searchlight*; Patna; 16<sup>th</sup> February 1930; *ibid*, p. 64.

<sup>18</sup> Note on Santhal Movement in Hazaribagh by R.P. Wilson, S.P. Hazaribagh, *ibid*; p. 64.

Paharia of Pangropahan and the movement of Sundra Paharia of Chandra was reported.<sup>19</sup>

A serious clash between the Santhals of Rajaun Hat, situated about three miles from Godda in Santhal Pargana Division and the Police reportedly took place on 29<sup>th</sup> October, 1930. The Police disrupted a meeting of around four thousand Santhal who had gathered to discuss the question of Khadi. A Brahmin named Sujadhar was arrested and released. The same night, five Santhals were arrested and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment ranging between five to eighteen months.<sup>20</sup> When the Santhals again attempted to meet on 6<sup>th</sup> November, the superintendent of police again arrested Sajadhar, a clash between the police and the Santhals again took place. Thereupon, about 200 military police was brought to the scene and fifty seven persons were arrested.<sup>21</sup>

### **Tribals and the Congress Ministry, 1937-'39**

The Congress appear to have not considered the tribal question of prime concern as it seems very much evident in the way the Congress Ministry

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>20</sup> *The Searchlight*, 12<sup>th</sup> November, 1930 [As quoted in KK Datta, *Freedom Movement in Bihar*, p. 134.]

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.



responded to the aspirations of tribals between 1937 and 1939. The rise of socio-political consciousness among the tribals, perhaps created an awareness of their role in the emerging set-up. It seems that tribals were not backed up by adequate and positive encouragement from the Congress Ministry which remained embroiled with other questions. A letter written by Dr. Rajendra Prasad to Sri Krishna Sinha, Prime Minister (PM) of Bihar on 19<sup>th</sup> December 1937<sup>22</sup> asking for performance report on various issues including upliftment of schedule caste and aborigines was followed by another on 4<sup>th</sup> March, 1938<sup>23</sup> excludes problems specific to tribals. In another letter reacting to the apprehension that christian and non-christian tribals were joining hands and it may have hampered the interests of the Congress, a number of steps are suggested to ameliorate the condition of tribals, these included, creation of a portfolio, scholarship to the aboriginal students, boarding houses, agricultural farms, employment in government services, propaganda against drinks etc.<sup>24</sup> While there are evidences that a decision was taken by the Congress Ministry to create a porfolio to specifically look into the problems of the aboriginals<sup>25</sup> in

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<sup>22</sup> Dr. R. Prasad, *Correspondence and Selected Documents*, Valmiki Chowdhary, (ed.); Vol. I, p. 151.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, vol.II, p. 08.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 34, Dr. R. Prasad's letter to Srikrishna Sinha, PM, Bihar, 9<sup>th</sup> April, 1938, vol. II.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, vol. II, p. 65.

July 1938, that decision was not implemented at least upto 1939<sup>26</sup>. The anguish of the congressmen working among the tribals may be understood by the tone and content of a letter written by A.V. Thakkar to Anugraha Narayan Sinha, Finance Minister of India on 19<sup>th</sup> April, 1939, in which he writes, "May I request you to let me know how the subject of the provision of a special officer and a special department by the Bihar government for the welfare of Harijans and aboriginals stand."<sup>27</sup> He further regrets that such measures were taken in other states but Bihar still lags behind.<sup>28</sup> It will not be inappropriate here to take an account of the case of Jaipal Singh, who after returning from England expressed his willingness to get himself some job in the government services with the help of Congress leaders,<sup>29</sup> but later found himself neglected<sup>30</sup> and went ahead to form Adibasi Sabha.

The Congress Ministry also found the pro-separation movement troublesome. The Adibasi Sabha was backed by Christian Missionaries and Bengali settlers in its pro-separation stir<sup>31</sup>, a matter of grave concern for the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, vol. III, p. 08.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, Vol. III, p. 238.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, Jaipal Singh's letter to Dr. R. Prasad, June 11<sup>th</sup>, 1938, vol. II, p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, Jaipal Singh's letter to Dr. R. Prasad, May 14<sup>th</sup> 1939, vol. III, p. 75.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid; Copy of letter dated Ranchi the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1938, written to A.V. Thakkar by Kshitish Chandra Basu, Secretary to Rabindra Nath Thakur; Vol. II, pp.313-314.

Congress Ministry. Perhaps, moved by such concerns, the Congress Ministry tried as far as possible to 'eliminate' Bengali Officers from Chhota Nagpur districts since it believed that such officers might be instrumental in encouraging pro-separation movement.<sup>32</sup> To a short notice question put up by Dr. Sachchidanand Sinha, the then Vice Chancellor of Patna University, in the Bihar Assembly on the agitation for the constitution of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana as separate province, K.B. Sahay, the then Parliamentary Secretary, outrightly dismissed it on historical, administrative, economic, financial and political grounds.<sup>33</sup> The Congress Ministry even assumed paternalistic tone akin to the colonial state in stating, "It would not been surprising if on its being separated the people of the area in general and the aboriginals in particular become victims of exploiters and adventurers, which would constitute a grave political menace to the peace and prosperity of this area." said K.B. Sahay."<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Fortnightly Report from H.E. Sir Thomas Stewart, KCIE, CSI, Governor of Bihar to Lord Brabourne; 28<sup>th</sup> June, 1938; *Linlithgow's Collection*; Microfilms, No. 44; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library; New Delhi.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

## The Congress And The Adibasi Sabha

Jaipal Singh, who later became an influential leader of the tribals show his inclination towards Congress by showing his concern over the condition of the tribals. Jaipal Singh writes to Dr. Rajendra Prasad in 1938, "...the situation is so depressing that the Adibasis may rebel against all forms of authority thereby causing harm to themselves and the rest of Bihar Province"<sup>35</sup>, While informing "I've now been recognized the natural leader of Adibasi, he again writes to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, in January 1939 that he feels that Adibasi movement should be within the ambit of the mainstream major national struggle and should not weaken the nationalist forces.<sup>36</sup> Although congressmen like A.V. Thakkar found Jaipal Singh to be a selfish fellow,<sup>37</sup> his influence increased in the area which saw consequent strengthening of Adibasi Sabha in the region. But Jaipal Singh either out of political imperative or due to genuine desire to associate with the Congress or even to get the kind of legitimacy which Congress enjoyed at that time as torchbearer of national movement, states in a letter to Dr. R Prasad in 1939: "When I saw you at

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<sup>35</sup> *Dr. Rajendra Prasad's Correspondence and Selected Documents*, Valmiki Thakur (ed.); Jaipal Singh's letter to Dr. R. Prasad, December 22<sup>nd</sup> 1938, vol. III, p. 177.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, Jaipal Singh's letter to Dr. R. Prasad, January 16, 1939, vol. III, p. 04.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, A. V. Thakkar's letter to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, 17<sup>th</sup> March, 1939, vol. III, p.40.

Ranchi I placed before you the aims and objects of the Adibasi Sabha to assure you that the Adibasi sabha was in full harmony with the principles of Indian National Congress. The people of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana, Adibasis and non-Adibasis want Purna Swaraj as much for India as for their own home territories, they want a place of honour in the national life of India. Our movement is thoroughly democratic”.<sup>38</sup> He even further suggests at the time while he was himself leading the Adibasi Sabha, “The important question is that Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana should have an entity and independent representation in the Indian National Congress. This can be done by making Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana into a separate Congress area.”<sup>39</sup>

The Adibasi Sabha, as it is evident from the above writings of Jaipal Singh, showed an ambivalent relationship with the Congress. While there was an urge for associating with the Congress, the Adibasi sabha showed no compunction in openly contesting elections against the Congress and even bitterly criticized the Congress policy of ‘neglect’ and ‘insincerity’. While leaders like Jaipal Singh and Paul Dayal showed their readiness to negotiate with the Congress leaders like Dr. Rajendra Prasad, they never failed to

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid; Jaipal Singh’s letter to Dr. R. Prasad; June 14<sup>th</sup>, 1939; vol. III, p.128.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

criticize Congress on any occasion. Jaipal Singh writes to Dr. Rajendra Prasad in 1939: "I have repeatedly announced in public that the Indian National Congress is sadly failing in its duty to the backward areas by neglecting them, by leaving them out of count in the body politic and by erring from its fundamental principle of Swaraj, truth and non-violence,"<sup>40</sup> The approach of the Congress towards the tribal question and its programmes seems to have either unclear to the tribals or the Congress was unable to form any concrete programme. This is evident from the letter of Prof. J.C. Heyward, President, Aboriginal Association, Hazaribagh, to Dr. Rajendra Prasad in 1945: "At present the Adibasi masses have no correct understanding of the Congress as they have been taught to view it with extreme suspicion as an alien worker."<sup>41</sup> He further states--- "Will the Congress fight for our rights if we joined the Congress, or will it ask us to merge ourselves in the majority community and thus to loose our political identity?"<sup>42</sup>

The aspiration of the tribals were represented through the demands of Adibasi Sabha. It is not to suggest that Adibasi Sabha solely represented the tribal aspirations but the agenda of Adibasi Sabha, was undoubtedly, to some

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, letter from Jaipal Singh to Dr. R. Prasad, 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1939, vol. III, p. 95.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, Prof. J C. Heyward's letter to Dr. R. Prasad, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1945, vol. VI.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

extent, instrumental in their political mobilization strategy which was capable enough to pose a threat to the Congress' political interests. The separation of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana was an old demand and we even find a resolution introduced in the Legislative Council by Rai Bahadur Satish Chandra Sinha of Purulia in 1939.<sup>43</sup> Jimut Bahan Sen talks about the origin of the movement for separation of Chhota Nagpur and says, "The lead for the cry of separate Chhota Nagpur as province was given during the inquiry by the Simon Commission. A society named Chhota Nagpur Zinnat Sawraj headed by Rai Saheb Bandiram Uraon started the movement."<sup>44</sup> While the demand of separation was not new, it got reinforced with the Adibasi Sabha taking it up especially with the support of leaders like Rai Saheb Bandiram Uraon. The resolution passed by the Chhota Nagpur Adibasi Sabha at its annual meeting in Ranchi on 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1939 includes the following demands:-

- (i) Separation of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana in the light of Government of India Act, 1935, and provision of Excluded Area.
- (ii) The revenue from mines shall be spent solely in Chhota Nagpur.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, Dr. R. Prasad's letter to Bishop of Calcutta and Metropolitan of India, Burma & Ceylon (Calcutta), 11<sup>th</sup> February 1939, vol. III, p. 24.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, Jimut Bahan Sen's letter to Dr. R. Prasad, 9<sup>th</sup> May 1939, vol. III, p. 63.

- (iii) Educational upliftment and the grant of scholarships.
- (iv) The primary education should be imparted through the medium of vernacular of the province.
- (v) Restoration of forest rights
- (vi) irrigation facilities
- (vii) Land rent should be reduced.<sup>45</sup>

It is interesting to note that land question does not find a place of importance unlike the rest of Bihar. We find a report in the *Searchlight* which mentions on September 30, 1937 that a meeting of Chhota Nagpur Kisan Sabha, Presided over by Paul Dayal and in the presence of Thebal Oraon, the secretary, demanded the amendment of Chhota Nagpur Tenancy Act, 1908, so as to streamline the system of collection thereby stopping the attachment of sale of land in the work of the realisation of arrears. It also demanded the restoration of lands to Bhuinhars from the non-Bhuinhars.<sup>46</sup> But later, it does not appear to be a major demand and the land question remains relegated to the background in the period under study.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid, vol. III, p. 280.

<sup>46</sup> *The Searchlight*; Patna; September 30, 1937.



## **The Congress And The Christian Missionaries**

The seeming inability of the Congress Ministry apart, the congressmen were not oblivious of the necessity to initiate and intensify social works in the tribal regions of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Partana. In September 1925, Gandhiji passed through tribal regions of Bihar and made his first acquaintance with the Hos at Chaibasa and Mundas at Khunti; he was impressed with the colony of the Bhaktas (Tanas and Birsaits) who believed in Khaddar and nearly four hundred of them plied their Charkhas most assiduously and sang their Bhajans in Chorus.<sup>47</sup>

The programmes of Gandhi which was made operational on the ground level by social workers like Thakkar Bapa, while functioning on the same plane on which the Bhaktas operated, was clearly distinct from the work of the Christian Missionaries functioning in the area. While the mode of operation in upliftment of socio-economic life was almost similar as adopted by the Christian missionaries and the congressmen, the distinction lay in their intervention in the cultural area, their motives, aims and objectives. Christian missionaries were concerned mainly with their prosetization activities and

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<sup>47</sup> *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*; vol. XXVIII; pp. 295-296; The Publication Division; Ministry of Information and Broadcasting; Government of India; Published, 1968.

this was considered inappropriate by Mahatma Gandhi in particular and Congress in general. Mahatma Gandhi writes: — “It is a conviction daily growing upon me that the great and rich Christian Missionaries will render true service to India, if they confine their activities to humanitarian service without the ulterior motive of converting India or at least her unsophisticated villages to Christianity, and destroying their social superstructure, which notwithstanding many defects have stood now from time immemorial the onslaught upon it from within and from without.”<sup>48</sup> The activities of Christian missionaries were also considered to be inimical to the feeling of nationalism as it may have led to de-nationalization of the tribals.<sup>49</sup>

It will be pertinent here to take note of the understanding of the congress workers like Thakkar Bapa regarding the tribal cultural complex at the point of their intervention. Thakkar Bapa writes- “Aboriginals are divided into Christians and non-Christians in the Director of public instructions report, and very rightly they should be separated as one has no connection with the other. Moreover, they belong to different societies and their educational equipments differ considerably”<sup>50</sup> Raj Kumar an associate of Thakkar Bapa

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<sup>48</sup> Singh K.S., *The Mahatma and Adibasis-in-L.P. Vidyarthi* edited *Gandhi and Social Sciences*, p. 124.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 125-126.

<sup>50</sup> *Dr. R. Prasad Correspondence & Select Documents*; Valmiki Chowdhary (ed.); vol. I, letter from A.V. Thakkar to Dr. R. Prasad, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1931.

working among the tribals writes: “The Christians are organized through the missions and their teachers who mostly get pay from the District Board funds are preachers also. Block granted by the District Board to the missions and the non-Christians are not benefited therefrom as the non-Christians do not want to send their boys to mission schools.”<sup>51</sup> It seems that there was a clear divide between the Christian and non-Christian tribals and the Christian missionaries were in a position to get funds from the government. Raj Kumar further states, “Besides, there are Christian sub-inspectors, constables, doctors of District Board and Peshkars and others who all are organised and follow the mandate of the mission whose sole aim is to take away the non- Christian aboriginals from the Hindu fold. Thus you will see the difficulty.”<sup>52</sup> It may be construed that the space for social work was occupied by the Christian Missionaries and the Congress was finding it difficult in contending with them in the face of their huge establishment, funds and old connections with the colonial government. It is in this context very important to take note of a letter to Dr. Rajendra Prasad from the Bishop of Ranchi in which he tries to reply to a number of accusations stating that the Christian missionaries were not neglecting the non-Christian population. He further says that the missionaries

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid, Rajkumar’s letters to Shyamlal, September 11, 1941, Vol. IV, p. 295.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

were not receiving any grant from the government and still bore 3/4<sup>th</sup> of the total cost and engaged themselves in inculcating nationalism.<sup>53</sup>

The Congress workers also felt that the Christian missionaries were involved in political activities, which were antithetical to the interest of the Congress as they were backing Adibasi Sabha. It may be partly due to the predominance of Christian tribals in the Adibasi sabha and partly due to the activities of Adibasi sabha and its Christian Missionary connection, which made them to appear to be acting in tandem. Although the Bishop of Ranchi categorically writes to Dr. Rajendra Prasad in 1939, "... Consequently a catholic could not be at liberty to join a party which for instance definitely teaches that private property is wrong or which distinctly preaches atheism or class warfare, such as communist party, but he is free to join Congress and Adibasi sabha"<sup>54</sup> but we find the congressmen looking at Christian missionaries in association with Adibasi Sabha, and therefore with suspicion as it is evident from Raj Kumar's letter to Shyamlal as late as in 1941, when he writes, " now the non-Christians are trying to cut off all connections with the sabha of Jaipal Singh but still there are many in this as well as in the other districts of Chhota Nagpur division and in Santhal Pargana who are carried

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid, Vol. 4, p. 55, Bishop of Ranchi's letter to Dr. Rajendra Prasad.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, same letter.

away by the words of Adibasi Sabha and do not know the real motive of the missionaries and their flocks, the Christians, whose sole aim is to bring the non-Christians under the influence of the Adibasi Sabha of the Christian.”<sup>55</sup> It is for certain that the Christian Missionaries sought to exercise political control over the Christian tribal. K. M. Abraham, Principal of St. Columba’s college, Hazaribagh, writes to Dr. R. Prasad as late as in 1946, “the catholic voters are giving the same reply that they will vote as they are directed by their Bishop or by their priest and so there is a great need for securing sympathy of the Catholic Bishop.”<sup>56</sup> But at the same time the stand of the Christian missionaries remained akin to the Adibasi Sabha vis-à-vis the Congress; at the same time, while the Adibasi sabha pledged itself to be in consonance with the principles of the Congress, the Christian missionaries also showed no open opposition to the Congress while keeping itself equidistant from the both: the Congress and the Adibasi Sabha, at least in principle. Dr. R. Prasad in a letter to B. S. Gilani in 1939. writes, “I met the Catholic Bishop Father Sevryn and also Father De Moulder and had a long talk with them... I understand from the Bishop that the misunderstanding regarding the attitude of the missionaries was also due to

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, Raj Kumar’s letter to Shyamlal, September 11, 1941, Vol. IV.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, letter from KM Abraham to Dr. R. Prasad, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1946, vol. VI.

shri Jaipal Singh who in one of his speeches has declared that he had the backing of the missionaries in the Adibasi movement.”<sup>57</sup>

The non-Christian tribals remained in the focus of attention of the Congress as it perceived the wedge created in the tribal society due to proselytisation activities of the Christian Missionaries and considered it fit to concentrate more on non-Christians tribals. Thakkar Bapa’s writing makes it more clear as he states, “while the Christian aboriginal are only 3,59,000, the non-Christians are as many as 52,84,644 or the non Christians are as many as 14.7 times the Christians. Moreover the Christians are 11 times more advanced in education as a whole than the non-Christians are... Thus the interests of two are quite different and the treatment and special facilities should be intended to the little educated of Christians only.”<sup>58</sup> Congress was willing to strengthen its position through social work among tribals. In the initial phase leaders like Dr. Rajendra Prasad advised cautious approach on the political plane until the social base gets strengthened by works among the tribals. While he cautions Thakkar Bapa that his committee on tribal may clash with Adibasi sabha<sup>59</sup> he categorically opines on the proposal of holding an Aborigines conference,

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, Dr. Rajendra Prasad’s letter to B.S. Gilani, 27 July 1939, vol. II, p. 194.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, AV Thakkar’s letter to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1931, vol. I.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, Dr. Rajendra Prasad’s letter to AV. Thakkar, 20<sup>th</sup> March, 1939, p. 40, vol.III.

“Any conference organized by our workers will naturally be compared by Jaipal Singh’s and unless our workers there can assure us of a successful session we might wait for sometime before deciding upon such a conference. Besides, conference at once becomes a sort of political demonstration and may detract from the constructive works, which is just in its beginning stage”<sup>60</sup> Dr. Rajendra Prasad was right in suggesting cautious approach as such an attempt earlier had failed.<sup>61</sup> The Congress also attempted to split Adibasi sabha on Christian and non-Christian divide which yielded results in its favour as it was able to win over important non-Christian tribal leaders like Rai Sahib Bandiram Oraon and Thebal Oraon.<sup>62</sup> It appears that the Congress’ propaganda against proselytisation was bearing fruits, as Jaipal Singh demands in 1939--- “Government must be neutral in regard to all missions- Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Brahma samaj and any other. The recent propaganda of Bihar Congress against Christian missions should be investigated.”<sup>63</sup> Jaipal Singh further states \_\_\_\_ “An aboriginal by embracing Hinduism, Islam and any other religion does not cease to be an adibasi.”<sup>64</sup> To the extent the Congress succeeded in penetrating into the non-christian tribals to the chagrin

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, Dr. Rajendra Prasad’s letters to A.V. Thakkar, 11 August 1941, vol. V.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, K.C. Basu’s letters to Shyamlal, September 2, 1941, vol. V, p. 183.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, Jaipal Rajkumar’s letter to Shyamlal, September 11, 1941, vol. V.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid; Jaipal Singh’s letter to Dr. Rajendra Prasad, May 24, 1939, vol. III, p. 95.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, Same letter.

of Jaipal Singh, the Congress was strengthened while, the Adibasi Sabha started finding it difficult to keep the tribal solidarity intact under its auspices,

## **Conclusion**

The Congress' intervention in the tribal cultural complex posed before it the problem of tackling the Christian missionary and the Adibasi Sabha at the same time. The insincerity or lackadaisical attitude of the Congress Ministry in 1937-'39 was partly explained by the fact that the tribal presence in the legislative assembly was miniscule. The Congress being a late starter found itself engaged in stiff competition and contest with the Christian missionaries particularly and also with the Adibasi sabah to certain extent while negotiating for its space. The understanding of the Congress that proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries leads to the process of de-nationalization on the one hand, and attempts to scuttle the isolationist approach of the colonial rulers through its mobilisational mode on the other naturally saw it in confrontation with the Christian missionaries. While the Congress was able to critique the activities of the Christian missionaries theoretically, on the ground level it found it rather difficult to contend with them (as one may cull from the bitter criticism rendered by the ground level workers). Christian Missionaries on the other hand desisted from openly



criticizing the Congress or to appear to be seen openly participating in the political activities. It appear that the Congress had the advantage of its ideological dominance to which even Adivabsi Sabha subscribed and the criticism the Congress by Jaipal Singh was based on its deviation from its professed ideology. The Congress' attempt to occupy the cultural space of the tribal region to shape its political discourse brought it in competition and contest with the Christian missionaries and the Adibasi Sabha.

## CONCLUSION

The intervention of the colonial state in the realm of the tribal life initiated a process of fashioning and refashioning of tribal policies in the light of changing political needs and also in accordance with constantly evolving interpretation of the tribal question by the colonial administrators, anthropologists, ethnographers, historians and other scholars. The 'imposition' of the colonial system in the tribal complex has been argued as a distinct feature, as prior to it as S.C. Roy would like us to believe that "in all the various changes of rulers in India no government succeeded to have interfered in the internal management of Nagpur until our times".<sup>1</sup> It is to be noted that Colonial State may not be treated at par with pre-colonial states owing to the internal tendency of the Colonial State to create a base for itself in the society on which it placed itself by its self assumed policy of 'positive' intervention. Moreover, it seems fallacious to assume tribes as isolates as one may observe the process of tribals' interaction with non-tribals at various levels.<sup>2</sup> It was perhaps due to inadequate understanding of the policy makers

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<sup>1</sup> Roy, S.C. – *Mundas and their country*, p. 109

<sup>2</sup> Singh, K.S.– *Tribal Soecity in India — An Anthropo- Historical Perspective*, Chapter 1-5.

towards the tribal question that we witness continuous turmoil in the tribal socio-political life throughout the colonial period.

The rise in the level of tribal political consciousness to the degree of the assertion of tribal identity may be chiefly attributed to the work of the Christian missionaries, the Indian National Congress and the Colonial State, each of whom vied to create niche for themselves in the tribal society and polity. The shift in the mode of political mobilization was largely an outcome of the ongoing social change heralded by the coming up of a number of societies and organizations. The mode of political mobilization was determined by a different kind of tribal aspiration akin to the trends influenced by modernity and increasing willingness of the tribal population to engage with the colonial state in pursuance with the fulfillment of their demands. The political agenda of the tribals articulated by different organizations, included demands for educational upliftment, scholarships, restoration of forest rights, irrigation facilities, reduction of rent, reservation in Government jobs, adivasi representation on various political fora, legislative bodies etc. One of the most important demands was that of the creation of a separate state out of tribal dominated division of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana.

It may also be said, that colonial policy was paternalistic in content and action. While it may be appreciated that the Governor of Bihar almost strictly followed the policy of non-interference in the work of Congress Ministry, he also extended suggestions from time to time not as his prerogative, but seemingly out of genuine concern.<sup>3</sup> Hallet's defense of the activities of Adibasi Sabha and movement for separate province on the ground of their being constitutional, is arguably non-partisan; but he even evinced unnecessary enthusiasm for the Christian Missionary participation. The colonial approach may also be located in the understanding of the tribal cultural complex of the anthropologists, ethnographer, historians and other social scientist of that age, who saw tribals as isolates and even in conflict with the non-tribals to a certain degree. Under the impact of such understandings the colonial rulers were inclined to assume themselves as "civilizing" force, thereby keen to reserve for themselves the right to intervene in any given situation.

It was in 1845 that the first batch of four Christian Missionaries arrived in Ranchi. These missionaries who belonged to Lutheran denomination had to wait for four years before they started winning converts

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<sup>3</sup> *Linlithgow Collection* – Letter from Hallet to the Governor General.

to their faith. Later, missionaries of Catholic and Anglican denominations also started working among the tribes of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana.

Unlike Vaishnavism that just touched the fringe of the Munda land, the new influence radiated deeper into it and opened up the hilly regions to the dynamics of cultural change. The Christian missionaries intervened in various aspects of tribal life with their humane approach by opening schools, colleges, co-operative society, health centres etc. Moreover, they also contributed to the development of tribal languages by developing grammar for them, attributing scripts and printing Bible in these languages. The christian Missionaries also tried to recreate tradition and folklores so as to show connection with biblical myths and thereby sought to establish original Christian link as an attempt to create its acceptability and legitimacy among the tribals. The attempt to recreate the tradition and folklores gave space to the Christian missionaries to step into the tribal memory so as to justifiably continue their proseletyzation works. "On the social front the agrarian breakdown and the advent of Christianity shaped revitalization movements which sought to reconstruct the tribal society which had been exposed to the influences of the new forces."<sup>4</sup> While the tribal society was responding to the

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<sup>4</sup> Singh, K. S.; *Birsa Munda And His Movement, 1874-1901— A Study of a Millenarian Movement In Chhota Naghpur*; OUP; Calcutta; Pub. 1983; p. 09.

colonial state and the elements of modernity, the Christian missionaries and the 'Dikus' (aliens, outsiders), it remained mostly untouched by the developments on the national scene, consequently, the movements, which arose in its realm could not prolong in the face of lack of support from outside and absence of co-ordinated strategy to tackle the aforesaid elements. The Colonial State and the Christian missionaries were perceived in association as programmes offered for the upliftment of the tribal population, based upon the similar understanding of the tribal question, and both these institutions sought to create more or less the same kind of discourse.

The seemingly inability of the Congress Ministry apart, the congressmen were not oblivious of the necessity to initiate and intensify social works in the tribal regions of Chhota Nagpur and Santhal Pargana. We come across at least three movements; the Tanabhat movement among the Oraons, the Haribaba Movement among the Hos and allied tribes, and the Rajmohini Movement among the Gonds, which reflected the impact of Gandhi. The programmes offered by Mahatma Gandhi like Swaraj, non-violence, truth, satyagraha, abstinence from drink attracted a sizeable section of tribals, especially the *Bhaktas*, who preached in the local idioms attacking

spirits and witchcraft and stressing devotion to for personal god and of observance of cleanliness etc.

The Congress intervention in the tribal complex posed before it the problem of tackling the Christian missionaries and the Adibasi Sabha at the same time. The insincere and lackadaisical attitude of the Congress Ministry may be accounted for by the fact that tribals had little say in existing political system owing to their minuscule presence in the legislative assembly. The Congress being a late starter found itself engaged in stiff competition and contest with the christian missionaries and also with the Adibasi Sabha to certain extent while negotiating for its own space. The understanding of the Congress that proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries leads to the initiation of the process of de-nationalization saw it in confrontation with the Christian missionaries. While the Congress in its ideology and propaganda was able to problemtise the activities of the Christian missionaries theoretically, at the ground level it found it rather difficult to contend with them. The Congress also attempted to scuttle the isolationist approach of the colonial rulers through its integrationist model.

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