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Tribe as Nation, Nation as Folk: Missionary Discourses on Santal Identity

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Abstract

I argue that, rather than representing the hegemonic worldview in colonial times, the Scandinavian Santal Mission in its early phase was based on counter-hegemonic and egalitarian ideas. Its main ideologist, Lars Olaf Skrefsrud, came from Norway, which was engaged in its own struggle for independence. I try to show that the countryside from which he came was hardly more ‘advanced’ or ‘modern’ than the Santal country, thus negating the ‘evolutionary gap’ often thought to exist between missionaries and their converts—with one significant exception: the Norwegian peasantry was already literate. I argue that the early success of the Mission was largely due to an ideology that resembled the Santals’ own egalitarianism. They found that they could use conversion as a tool in their own struggle—especially since the spread of the faith in the early period was largely the work of the converts themselves, and since the Mission did not impose any strict theological framework as long as the converts left their ‘heathen’ cults behind. But this commonality of interest broke down in the 1890s, as the missionaries sought to impose their authority over the Christian Santals both in terms of leadership and of theological correctness. What remained, however, was the sharing of literacy and the missionaries’ contribution to Santal literature, helping to create an elite whose revendications, even now, present a continuity with the traditional egalitarianism of the Santals as well as with the early counter-hegemonic stance of the missionaries.

Introduction: Evangelical missionaries and the colonial order

‘The Evangelists’, say the Comaroffs about the British missionaries to South Africa, ‘were not only the bearers of a vocal protestant ideology, nor merely the media of modernity. They were also the human vehicles of a hegemonic worldview’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 33). In the present article, I question this view, looking more closely at the world view and cultural attitudes of a couple of Scandinavian missionaries to the Santals, founders of a mission that was, for its time, quite successful. Their activity certainly contributed to the formation of the Jharkhandi Santal elite, which may be characterised as one of the more important and vocal Adivasi elites today. Rather than simply reproducing a hegemonic discourse, I argue, these missionaries positioned themselves, as well as the Santals, in a manner which fostered a counter-hegemonic position. There is a measure of continuity, here, between the missionaries’ position in

their homelands, the identity they sought to create for the Santals, and the position many Santal activists revendicate today.

The Comaroffs' characterisation of Evangelical missionaries does indeed fit the profile of the founders of the Scandinavian mission to the Santals. 'Their position', they say, 'as the dominated fraction of a dominant class' within British society (Bourdieu 1984: 421) was to have a profound effect on the role of these men in the imperial scheme of things' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 59). They stress that most missionaries were from the 'industrializing river valleys, the urban peripheries, or proletarianized village. And most of them had very little formal education, theological or secular' (Ibid.: 85). 'They were caught between the rich and the poor, either indeterminate in their class affiliation or struggling hard to make their way over the invisible boundary into the bourgeoisie' (Ibid.: 86).

Lars Olaf Skrefsrud and Hans Peter Børresen, the founders of the mission studied here; both came from very poor backgrounds. Both were trained mechanics, a profession that was, or was about to become, part of what Hobsbawm calls 'the labour aristocracy'. Such upwardly mobile men were easily co-opted into the imperialist or nationalist projects of nation-states at the time, for their aspirations of upward mobility might well succeed in a climate where there was a regular demand for their services. Yet the very same category of men was found in the liberal-radical political movements that were as much a part of the late nineteenth century as was imperialism or nationalism. Such men tended, in England at least, to be members of strong labour unions: yet these unions usually were, like the men themselves, moderate rather than revolutionary in politics (Hobsbawm 1968: 274-75).

While the social and cultural position of such men may have been similar, it remains to be seen whether radical ideas or a desire for social advancement—or indeed both—were important in forging their careers. In the case of our missionaries, I shall try to show the continuity between their positioning at home and the ideology that they brought with them to the Santals.

The ideology of the Santal Mission in its early days

The Santals are a nation, affirmed Skrefsrud in the 1870s, going on to explain to his potential supporters that what he and Børresen must build, was a Santal National Church (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2003: 281; 2008: 168). One of the intentions behind this statement was, quite clearly, to argue that 'minor' quarrels between various strains of Scandinavian and Western protestants should not influence his missionary work. Another intention, certainly, was to affirm the distinctness of Santal culture within the Indian context, using the notion of tribe to gain relative autonomy both for his project and for 'his' people within the colonial context. This was, and still is, a strategy common enough among missionaries, and one that critics, not least in the context of Indian nationalism, have tended to characterize as an example of 'divide and rule' tactics. But there was a third aspect of this reference to nationhood, which Skrefsrud—who defined and formulated the Mission's ideology—clearly aimed at the prevailing cultural and political climate in Norway, his home country.

There, the position of radical liberals implied, above all, nationalist opposition to the dominant position of Sweden in the double monarchy that included both countries since 1814. This position meant support for a parliamentary democracy—the two countries had a common king, but separate parliaments. Skrefsrud was quite clearly partisan to both

these aspects of the radical movements in his own country. More directly related to his view of the Santals, he also supported the efforts to create a separate Norwegian language (the elite used a dialectal form of Danish) and a schooling system based in the rural and popular, rather than elite, culture. He did not, in fact, himself use the new ‘neo-Norwegian’ language, but the ideology of primacy for the oral and the colloquial would remain a feature of the translation work of the missionaries (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008: 322). Thus Paul Olaf Bodding, Skrefsrud’s successor and the author of the Santal dictionary, explained that his collection of folk-tales was, above all, meant to teach him the simple and colloquial language he needed for his Bible translation (Bodding 1915: 9-16). He did, in fact, have to defend this translation several times, against critics from Anglican missionaries who favoured a more formal; ‘biblical’, language.

The content of the folktales did pose a problem for the missionaries, however, since most of them dealt with the deities or spirits (*bonga*), which were of course the objects of the ‘heathen’ cult. While the decision to record such stories was related to the projects of conversion – such as using the language of the tales to translate the Bible – the decision also implied the conviction that Santal culture and patrimony must be respected. Their solution, as noted, was to transform the old religion into ‘folklore’. In spite of the influence from Grundtvig, there is no indication that the missionaries shared his conviction that the old gods of Nordic mythology were precursors of Christianity.

The struggle for independence and the quest for a re-invented Norwegian language and culture were major political forces in Norway at the time. For the liberals, fighting for the independence of their own country, it was but natural to support similar struggles elsewhere...the poet and public figure Björnson, for example, was very active in support of Czech independence (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008: 154, 271). Skrefsrud sympathized with a movement re-inventing the traditions of a Norwegian culture deemed primitive, even ‘tribal’, by other Europeans, and he does seem to have seen the Santals, in their relation to the Hindu majority, in terms of a similar ideological framework.

His views are illustrated, better than in such general abstractions, by a story he tells in a letter from the missionary field. Here he describes a meeting between two Christian Santals and some Bengali Brahmins, who

‘several times got something to think about from our simple Santals...There was one Maloti Raja who challenged the Santals come pay their rent, to... speak to him about religion if they had the courage. One of the Santals said: ‘I have the courage’. So the Brahmin started to quote a *sloka* from his Sanskritic books and to praise Agni as a great God and everybody’s ancestor. Our Santal asked what that was supposed to mean, to which the Brahmin retorted by laughing: ‘If you cannot even understand that, there is no point in talking’. ‘Then I won’t talk to you’, the Christian answered, ‘if you speak in a language I cannot understand and I cannot answer, then you can tell me this. I only have to answer you in Santali, to pay your compliment back’. Then the Brahmin taught that the fire was our god and forefather. The Christian answered: ‘Then kiss your father who is burning in your pipe of tobacco, let us see how much filial love you have in you’. The Brahmin answered that he would burn himself and so could not do it. Then the Christian laughed and said; ‘Then I will advice you to come to my god where you shall not need to have such fear’. The Brahmins laughed and said (to their kin): ‘The Santal is wiser than you are’ (Skrefsrud to Hertel, 10.03.1880; cited in Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008: 134).

Readers of folktales—such as the collection of Norwegian tales published by Asbjørnsen and Moe in 1840—will recognise the scenario of the peasant or practical man who outwits the priest or other person of authority. What Skrefsrud wanted to show, was that a new Santal conscience was emerging—through the work of the Mission—a conscience steeped in common sense and free from Hindu ‘superstition’. The Santal, in this story, has emerged from his stigma of inferiority and affirms the kind of equality that Skrefsrud had wanted to achieve. It was a similar kind of equality, in relation to national and European elites, that radical Norwegians wanted to achieve for themselves and for the ‘common man’ in Norway. Like Santals in their folktales, Skrefsrud shows no respect, here, for Brahmin erudition, as common sense seemed to affirm the equality of all men. My point here is that his views were in tune with those of the Santals themselves: as P.O. Bodding was to write later, the stress on practical and common sense was a feature of Santal culture, favouring a tendency to privilege ‘folk’ virtues over those of an elite.

Skrefsrud wrote this letter to Ludvig Hertel, a clergyman in Denmark who was to become one of the Mission’s main supporters in Scandinavia. Hertel was a Grundtvigian—belonging to a movement noted for its role in the rehabilitation of folk culture. Skrefsrud clearly wants to show that his Mission follows an ideology close to that of the Grundtvigians—opposing folk to elite culture, and promoting a positive self-image among Scandinavian peasants. Radical and democratic, the Grundtvigian movement put the periphery above the centre, the ‘nature’ of the people above the ‘culturedness’ of the elite, and the ‘warm heart’ of popular Christianity above the ‘cold’ intellectualism of theological learning. The movement was an elaboration of national romanticism—as conceived by Herder—in a context where the ethnic content of folk culture opposed the power of multi-ethnic empires (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008: 151-154; 167-171).

The Mission borrowed heavily from this national-romantic background. To preserve Santal culture through the hoped-for conversion to Christianity, Skrefsrud and his successor Bodding stressed the value of tradition in the form of folklore. In Norway, folk tales had become a cherished national heritage which no longer challenged Christian beliefs, and Bodding’s work on ‘Santal Folk Tales’ (1925-29) does in fact read rather like Asbjørnsen and Moe’s collection of Norwegian tales, which had been published a generation before Skrefsrud and Børresen took it upon themselves to evangelize the Santals.

Evangelism in Europe and the memory of a recent ‘pagan’ past

To European elites of the late nineteenth century, belief in the supernatural figures of the folk-tales seemed to belong to the hoary past. But we should note that Asbjørnsen and Moe, in their introduction to the tales, recognised that many of their older informants actually ‘believed’ in these beings (Asbjørnsen and Moe 1982). And perhaps the Norwegian folk culture was not exceptional in this regard. Commenting on the status of Christianity in Britain at the time of the 1851 census, David Bebbington wonders about the religion of those that did not go to church at that time, since, as he says, modern atheism was still a very minor influence among the people in Britain:

It may well be...that a stronger influence on the lower classes was a folk religion heavily indebted to paganism. The survival of rural witchcraft is vividly illustrated in the novels of Hardy, but there is also a growing body of evidence suggesting widespread belief in

esoteric remedies for misfortune, the sacredness of nature and the importance of ritual observances at turning points in personal life and the annual cycle. Such notions were not confined to the countryside. City churches, as in Lambeth, were thronged with working-class attenders at harvest festival and on New Year's eve, the two occasions when church services regularly marked events in nature rather than in Christian story (Bebbington 1989: 113-14).

In Britain as in Norway, then, the pre-Christian past was not as far away as the elites, then—and probably most people today tended to believe. We must allow for the survival of significant pre-Christian elements in European popular culture at least until well into the nineteenth century. In other words, Santal 'animism' must have been far less different from Western European folk religion than Westerners then, as now, would like to believe. And, moreover, it may well be that it was not the 'primitive' or 'tribal' nature of rural Norwegians that was so different from other European folk cultures. Rather, it was the fragility of Norwegian elite culture, compared to neighbouring countries like Denmark or Sweden, which made Norway special. Here, the project of nation-building could find no base in the 'advanced' culture of other European elites, and so had to rely on an idealization of folk culture.

It is a main point with Bebbington (1989) that it was only during the nineteenth century that a country like Britain became fundamentally Christian, in the sense that Christian beliefs thoroughly replaced the elements of an earlier folk religion, and there is no reason to believe that this change came earlier to Norway. Many people in Skrefsrud's generation must have been aware that Christianity in the European countries—at least according to the strict criteria of Evangelicals—was still a shallow veneer on a complex folk culture. More importantly, this awareness would explain the zest and enthusiasm with which Evangelisation and Home Mission work was undertaken in the middle years of the nineteenth century, both in Norway and Britain. If only the people would give up drink and fornication and come to church or prayer-house instead, then only civilisation could triumph.

More directly relevant here, of course, is that this awareness must have inspired the missionaries in their efforts. If, in Norway, trolls and goblins had lost their religious significance to become 'folklore' within a couple of generations, why should not the same thing happen to the bongas of the Santals? The optimism of the missionaries—hoping to convert the bulk of the Santal 'nation' in a few generations—may seem pure phantasm to us today: to the Evangelical missionaries then, it may have seemed quite rational, if we assume that they thought that just such a thing had happened, quite recently and on a similar scale, in their home countries. Thus within a short span of time, the Santals could become Christian and their old religion would become folklore. Like Skrefsrud's neighbours in his own countryside, they could then be brought out from the darkness of superstition into the light of Christian rationality.

It is no coincidence, then, that our missionaries came to forge strong links to the Mission of the Interior at home—'the Home Mission'—in Scandinavia. They were in fact working in parallel on very similar problems. The Santals, as Skrefsrud saw it, were the stuff of future Christians but they did drink and their sexual morals were loose: these, however, were exactly the problems of the masses of his own countryside at home, when he was a youth. In Norway, Evangelicalism and Teetotalitarianism eventually got the better of these sins; so rather than being shocked by the situation, Skrefsrud engages himself in a struggle similar to the one he knows from his homeland. Skrefsrud and

Börresen, then, try at once to be teachers of morals and social workers, while defending ‘their’ converts against unscrupulous moneylenders or corrupt officials. The fight against drinking was to become a constant theme in the work of the mission, as they tried to make the government ban liquor in the Santal country while combatting the importance of rice beer, which had been so important in Santal traditional ritual, quite beside its role as a source of gaiety and pleasure. Fighting alcoholism was a struggle easily understood by the Mission’s Scandinavian supporters, since they were engaging in the same fight at home.

These perspectives considerably reduce the perceived cultural distance—including the ‘evolutionary gap’ dear to nineteenth-century thinkers—between European folk culture and that of the Santals—or, indeed, between the former and any of the ‘tribes’ which Christian missionaries of the nineteenth century were trying to convert.

Missionary strategies

Skrefsrud and Börresen were quite clear, in the early years of the Mission from 1867 to around 1890—that they wanted the Santal converts to remain Santals in culture and language, while ‘changing their hearts’ to accept Christianity as a religion. I have stressed the ideological influences, from his native Norway, which induced Skrefsrud to respect indigenous language and culture. The Church, which they also wanted to give a Santal form, should one day be controlled by the Santal themselves, and its teachings must adjust to a folk culture among people with little education. They speak of the first, the original, apostolic Church as their inspiration, but they never define its tenets with any precision. The true Church is the community of believers, with no need for theological expertise (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008: 168; 173-174).

‘We did not start’ said Skrefsrud during a visit to Sweden, ‘to teach them Luther’s or any other Cathecism, but sought to get them on their knees, praying...When they had experienced spiritual life in their hearts, then we started to instruct them’ (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008: 127). There was, then, a conscious lack of dogmatism, which was also meant to secure independence from other congregations: the church they wanted would have no need for theologians. And the missionaries they needed, must be men who felt the calling for the work, who were prepared for the hard life in the Santal country, and who were able to mix freely with the Santals: such men did not need a degree in theology (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008; 166-167, 174-175). Börresen, in fact, wanted to restrict the number of Europeans in the Mission, for ‘fifty natives cannot propagate as much as one bad European can destroy’ (op. cit.: 286). It is clear, that their idea of Evangelization, in the mid- 1880s, was that the converts themselves should be left to convert their friends and neighbours. That this actually seems to have worked quite well in this early phase, underlines the point that the new Santal Christians saw the propagation of the faith as their own project.

The Santals should, in fact, be converted by the Santals—on the snowball principle, so to speak. In a way, the missionaries try to create, in the ‘nation’ they call Santalistan, the kind of ideal Christian community that, as they saw it, was only too easily spoiled by the influence of priests or other authorities. As such, the missionaries are classical examples of the Utopian, that other imperialist figure, who tries to create on the edges of empire the kind of situation that he cannot forge in the midst of the contradictions of power at its centre.

Skrefsrud's activity in land reforms, mediating the Santal revendications of 1871, which led to recognition of land rights for the Santal, won him considerable respect among the Santals (Hodne 1966). They, as also paternalist but well-meaning colonial officials such as Campbell, saw these reforms as a major step forward. But, as these land rights were alienable, the results were negative in the long run, as numerous Santals later lost their title to land due to debt.

Skrefsrud's affirmation that the Santals were a nation was never intended as a challenge to British rule. In defending the group against the Hindu majority, he and Börresen were indeed taking an active part in a policy of 'divide and rule', implicitly denying the unity of India. But on the cultural level, the missionary view put the Santal on a level with other aspiring 'nations', possessing a 'national spirit' or 'genius' in Herder's sense. The Santals, in this view, were deemed to possess their own culture, which implied their right to be different and to express their difference openly. In more recent terms, Skrefsrud from the start rivendicated an ethnic identity for the Santals – as large numbers of Santal activists do today.

More specific to the Scandinavian Mission, perhaps, was their attitude to higher schooling and to erudition in general. Skrefsrud and Börresen themselves had no such background, and they certainly felt that their own relative success as missionaries proved how useless higher education would be to the Santals. They seem to have been convinced that 'natural' wit and intelligence would always prevail over erudition and formal training – as seen in the story Skrefsrud told about 'our simple Santals'. This was, of course, also how the Norwegian elite tried to boost their self-image in the face of the overwhelming high culture of almost any other national elite.

Such scepticism did not include basic schooling: the three R's were seen as ~~both~~ useful and necessary, and of course good protestants must be able to read the Bible. This, by the way, also built on Scandinavian tradition: Denmark-Norway (then united in a single kingdom) had been among the first countries in Europe—and the world—to introduce elementary schools on an obligatory basis, and the main reason was that the Bible must be open to all. This also meant that literacy, in Norway, was abnormally high as early as 1800 compared to most European countries. However, this popular literacy, again, did not sustain an elite culture (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008: 29). Crafts were, of course, useful. Skrefsrud and Börresen were both mechanics, craftsmen themselves. These views led to an impressive expansion of primary schools run by the missionaries, though these were certainly of a low standard.

But most important for us is the missionaries' conviction that schooling must be done in Santali. Schooling was seen as a practical tool and a means of understanding the Christian faith, and neither Bengali nor English teaching was relevant to these goals. But by insisting on Santali in the schools, the missionaries laid the foundations of a literate Santali culture. Skrefsrud had to develop his own transcription system for the language, and this was so satisfactory that it is still used. They concentrated on printing religious literature, but Skrefsrud also published 'The Traditions and Institutions of the Santals' (*Horkoren Mare Hapramko reak' Katha*) in 1887, as told by his 'guru', Kolean (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008: 235). Later, Bodding was to contribute significantly to the development of Santal literature through his folk tales (1925-29).

Along with the usual colonial narrative, then, of civilising the savages, there is in the history of the Scandinavian Santal Mission a counter-narrative about the rights of peripheral peoples to cultural and political autonomy—even 'nationhood'. The content of

such claims was, in the colonial context, counter-hegemonic, and the tradition flowing from this source continues to be so, in privileging ‘folk’ over ‘elite’ culture. This implies an egalitarian ideology which the Santals and the missionaries shared, and which has continued to inspire the Santal counter-narrative to elite hegemony and state domination.

Santal ideology

Egalitarianism among the Santals was certainly there well before the missionaries came. The story of Mando Singh, the Hindu prince who wanted the Santals to accept him as their king, may be cited here. In the story, the prince tries to convince the Santals that they will be better off under his authority, but their answer is to hang a cow’s hide at the entry to every village— and this scares the Hindu prince away (Carrin-Bouez 1991: 95-96). This story, certainly, is much older than any missionary influence. Mando Singh may or may not refer to a real personage in history, but this is immaterial. Central India does not lack examples of kings who managed to incorporate tribal populations in their domain. Thus, the message of the story is clear: we, the Santals, neither need nor want a Hindu king to rule over us.

The Hul—the Santal rebellion of 1855—was, of course, the most evident sign of such resistance to outside domination, and its leaders Sidhu and Kanhu have become emblematic of the Santal will to assert their identity and material rights. But in the *Hul Reak’ Katha*—one of the stories collected for Bodding by his Santal assistants—we find quite harsh criticism of the authoritarian leadership of Siddhu and Kanhu. They are accused, among other things, of appropriating the prettiest women for themselves by force (Andersen, Carrin and Soren 2011: 172-190). Briefly, we are made to understand that even these heroes were corrupted by power, once they felt themselves to be superior to the common Santals. Despite the charismatic leadership of these heroes, they are hit by criticism emanating from egalitarian values.

Santal chiefs had little political authority: important decisions were taken in village assemblies, and in the court held at the first night of the annual hunt. In these assemblies, every man could speak, and the art of oratory was cultivated and respected. These institutions seem to have been sustained by democratic and egalitarian values that ran deep, and which, according to Marine Carrin, still characterises Santal culture. She argues that it is this democratic tradition that explains but also transcends Santal political activity even today—so that the Santals may speak with many voices, but do not let themselves be muted (Carrin 2008, 2012, 2015). The parties particularly favoured by Santals, typically, belong to the left of the political spectre.

There is also a tradition of resistance—the Hul is of course emblematic of this. Thus Edward Duyker (1987) argued that participation in the Naxalite movement was assimilated to the memory of the Hul. The victims of violence were the same: moneylenders, merchants and the police. Duyker also noted how Santal social organization, based on networks of clan and kinship, contributed to the mobilization. As in the Hul, he argued, Santals opposed their egalitarian ideology to the authoritarian structure of the state and to capitalist exploitation. He also showed that the areas where Naxalites were most active were precisely those where the Santals were in a desperate position, having lost all or most of their land.

Skrefsrud and Børresen, then, did not create this egalitarian Santal ideology. But I would argue that the first wave of conversions by the Mission, in the 1870s, was in fact an expression of Santal resistance. In the Mission, they sought an ally against the various

forces that were oppressing them, and Skrefsrud's work for the land reforms convinced them that here was a *saheb* who could be used for their own purposes—to have a degree of influence on a colonial administration that could not be opposed by violent resistance. In other words, the missionaries were looking for a people to convert, but on their side, the Santals were looking for allies with access to the colonial power. The alliance worked well, for the first ten or twelve years, and the number of converts grew until the middle of the 1880s. By the 1890s, the growth had peaked, however, and there were very few new conversions.

The rise and fall of Sibü Besra

But then, when famine struck the Sultanpur area in 1892, there was a massive demand for baptism, sometimes by entire villages. Sultanpur had been one of the centres of the Kherwar movement, but now the population seemed to be turning to Christianity. Johan Nyhagen, the historian of the Scandinavian Santal Mission, opines that the critical conditions during the crisis had led to a spiritual awakening. The Mission in the area was led by Sibü Besra (1850-1908), son of a chief and a prominent figure among the converts, who went to the boys' school at Ebenezer (Benagaria), converted, and was ordained as a 'pastor' by the mission in 1884. Besra was already well known for his hymns and songs, which are still being sung by the Santali Christians today.

In Sultanpur, almost 2000 Santals converted in a short time, and Besra had a heavy charge of work. Skrefsrud and Bodding wanted to send a European missionary to Sultanpur to help Besra in work, but Börresen insisted that they should leave the matter to Sibü Besra, confident that the Santal pastor could cope. He did succeed in winning the confidence of the Sultanpur converts, and we are told that the old missionaries were impressed with his management of the Mission there (Nyhagen 1990, II: 195-196).

Then the Scandinavian missionaries changed their mind. Harald Jörgensen, in his early history of the Mission, says that Sibü let the community elders do most of the work, while he himself spent his time settling quarrels among the non-converted Santals. He adds that Sibü earned good money from his activity as arbitrator or judge (Jörgensen 1920: 170).

Skrefsrud had indeed spent much of his time settling disputes in the early years, and Börresen's ideology had always been to involve the elders actively in the running of congregation affairs. But we are reminded here, even more, of the role of many gurus of the bhakti sects among subaltern groups in India (e.g. Dube 1998). By their special religious status, these gurus could provide a leadership that, due to the egalitarian ideology, might not have been tolerated from profane or secular leadership figures. As for the Scandinavian missionaries, their religious position as well as their prestige as *sahibs*, set them above and apart from the level where egalitarianism directed Santal behaviour.

But clearly, the Scandinavian missionaries were not prepared to accept that a Santal could take on a similar role. Nyhagen implies that Sibü Besra 'put on airs', and thought himself the equal of the missionaries. 'Sibü could not stand the pressure of such a movement', comments Nyhagen (1990, II: 195-196). 'His success destroyed him'. In the end, Sibü Besra was removed to another station, and replaced by others'.

But the Christian community in Sultanpur does not seem to have accepted this intervention against their pastor and guru. Within a few years, they had given up

Christianity end returned to their old religion. And, says Nyhagen, the effect was that they refused any attempt at Christianization for many years to come.

From egalitarianism to authoritarianism: the Mission loses momentum

The absence of new conversions seems to have been directly related to a change of attitude among the missionaries. From the middle of the 1880s, they began to look more critically at the ‘quality’ of the conversions—how good Christians were the converts way the Santal really?

At the same time, Börresen, who had left considerable initiative to his Santal collaborators, was getting old, and Skrefsrud had to take over much of the administrative work. He soon found fault with the way the Santal workers were operating. At the end of the 1890s, he sacked a number of them and had others posted to new stations. One of his accusations was that they were making money from their calling—an accusation, we have seen, which was also directed at Sibu Besra. Bodding, who commented on this episode later, felt that Skrefsrud had gone too far, and that many of the accusations were unjust (Bodding 1919: 22).

There were two different questions here: one was the new lack of confidence in the Santal collaborators, which among other things also showed that Skrefsrud was getting more suspicious, perhaps even somewhat paranoid, with age. But the change was also due to influences from Scandinavia. The Mission had started as the ‘Indian Home Mission’ to the Santals, and financial aid came at first mostly from Christians in India. At that time, they had been supported by the Baptists, and there was a dramatic break with the Baptist Mission Society (BMS) in 1878. The Santal missionaries tried, after that, to gain a maximum of independence from their supporters, which they now found mainly in Scandinavia. But they could not escape the Lutheran influence from independents as well as Church people in these countries, and gradually the pressure mounted to assure that the Santals became good Lutherans. Bodding as well as the Swedish missionary Ernst Heuman, who arrived around 1890, were both theologians trained in the Lutheran tradition, and this, too, certainly influenced the ideology of the Mission (Carrin and Tambs-Lyche 2008: 286-289).

We do not have any evidence as to what Santals thought of these changes, which must have been rather incomprehensible to the converts. But the lack of new conversions may be evidence enough that, as the Mission got more orthodox, it lost its attraction for the Santals. As I have tried to show, the conversions came not as simply submission to a couple of new gurus, but also because the Santals felt the Mission could be a useful ally in their struggle against moneylenders and authorities. They had been met with a rather open mind as to their beliefs, provided they prayed, came to the meetings regularly, and abstained from the worship of the bongas. Now, they were being told that their faith in the Christian god had to be structured in a precise, correctly understood way and no other. The missionaries had been benevolent paternalists so far. Now, their authority became oppressive, in a way that must have been rather unacceptable to an egalitarian culture.

Conclusion

It may be asked whether these old leaves from missionary history is of any interest to today’s Adivasis. In short, I have tried to make three points. The first concerns the

colonial situation itself. Even by critics of colonialism, it is often taken for granted that there was a considerable cultural gap between missionaries and other colonial figures, coming from a 'developed' background, and people like the Santals, who were considered backward even by their dominant Hindu neighbours. I have tried to show that, for men like Skrefsrud, this gap was much smaller than is usually thought.

Norwegian peasants were not yet participating in the modern, Western elite culture, and even their Christianity was but a thin veneer over various older and non-Christian beliefs at least till the mid-19th century. They lived far from urban centres: Lillehammer had just passed one thousand inhabitants when Skrefsrud left it. The railway came to Bengal and to Norway at practically the same time in 1854-55. Lillehammer was not on the railway, however: but a paddle steamer was introduced on the lake Mjøsa, linking Lillehammer to the railway head at Eidsvold, in 1854. Santals worked on the construction of the railway: much of the work on the Norwegian line was done by labour imported by the British contractors. Lillehammer had some commerce and a few merchants, as had Rampur Hat or Suri. There was absolutely nothing in Norway that could be compared to Calcutta, and Skrefsrud's wife Anne—who died soon after her arrival in the Mission – was overwhelmed by the size, the monuments and the cultural splendour of Bengal's great city (Hodne 1950). Yet the one thing that the missionaries had and the Santals had not, was to be part of a culture where almost everybody could read and write. This was to be the main cultural benefit that the Mission brought to the Santals.

My second point is that the relative success that the Mission had among the Santals was neither fortuitous nor a result of a particular efficiency in evangelization, but that it resulted from a certain similarity in culture between the Santals and their missionaries. Both cultures were basically egalitarian and democratic, while both were also subaltern, facing powerful elites both in Europe and in India. Thus Skrefsrud could feel at one with the common sense that Santals opposed to the 'useless' refinement of Brahmins and moneylenders, and the early converts must have felt this sympathy. Skrefsrud was impressed with the way in which Santals took decisions at public meetings, which fitted well with his democratic ideology. Thus the Santals must have felt, not only that here were a couple of *sahebs* that they could use in their own struggles, but also that these *sahebs* were different from others, and, perhaps, in some ways, more like themselves. In the first years, they were acting rather like the gurus of many bhakti sects: setting down rules for the new life, but leaving the Santals to practice them without too much interference, while the missionaries, again like the gurus, would settle disputes and mediate outside contacts in a paternalistic manner. I stress the point of similarity to the gurus here: if, as Bodding and other missionaries thought, a spiritual quest lay at the bottom of conversion, then there would have been ample alternatives in Hinduism, and a number of Hinduising movements have in fact been active in or near the Santal area. The missionaries, however, had the advantage of being free from any link to Brahmin or to Hindu moneylender elements.

The third point I want to make is that this relative harmony between ideologies and patterns of leadership lasted only for a while—fifteen to twenty years—and that when the missionaries came to insist on closer control and more authority over Santal lives, the Mission lost its attraction for the prospective Santal converts. Similarly, when a Christian Santal leader—Sibu Besra—began to take on the role of guru reserved for the missionaries, the latter could or would not tolerate it. Clearly, Santal egalitarianism was

an excellent ideology among subalterns: the exception to this equality should be reserved for themselves. Indeed, the history of the Mission during the first half of the twentieth century shows that the Scandinavians were in fact more reluctant to trust the Santals to run their own Church, than other missionaries.

A fourth point may be added as a postscript. The populist ideology of the missionaries, privileging folk culture and common sense over the pretensions of the elite, actually worked very well in Norway for a long time. From the latter quarter of the nineteenth century and throughout the first third of the twentieth, this was the base on which Norwegian nationalism and ideological nation-building was based. This continued, in a different form, from 1934 to the 1970s (save for the German occupation 1940-45), when the Labour Party was in power. In what has been characterised as a one-party state, intellectual elites were acknowledged only when they remained loyal to the hegemonic position of the Labour Unions in the Party leadership. Later, too, anti-elite ideology remained important, not least through the influence of the Norwegian emigrants to America—representing a farming, mid-West population strongly opposed to the American elite—which makes up for about half of the Norwegian ethnic population.

But a similar populist ideology would come to have a very different place in India, where nation-building was for long the work of an urban, educated elite. While important figures like Tagore eulogized the simple culture of the peasants, theirs was an ideology about, rather than of, the subaltern populations. There has indeed been a challenge to elite hegemony from OBC groups since the 1980s, but the groups in question are largely dominant farming castes whose attitude to tribals and low castes hardly qualifies as egalitarianism. In the Indian context, the ideology of the early Scandinavian missionaries has therefore been doomed to play a marginal role. In the Santal revindication of identity, however, the folk cultural element remained central, and arguably this is also to some extent true of the regional identity of Jharkhand State, at least as the large tribal minority would like to project it.

The ideology of Skrefsrud and Børresen, in short, was not quite the hegemonic world view that the Comaroffs ascribe to missionaries in general. Rather, as subalterns in the European context, their ideas resonated with those of their subaltern converts. The ideology of Santal ethnic assertion was certainly not created by the missionaries. But in the period 1870-1890, the missionaries contributed to give this assertion its modern form.

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