

Christian Missionaries' Accounts and Interpretations on Santal Tribe: A Groundwork for Santali Grammar and Literature Development- A Historical Review

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Abstract

The history of Santal tribe had neither any recorded history nor any number of written literatures. The Santal tribe was of opinion "*puṭhiraakkhon, thṭireaksorosa*" (the memory is superior to the book) and as the matter of fact, they tried to pass and retain the oral tradition to the generation to generation. There was a huge need to record the oral tradition of the Santal tribe. This noble work was marvelously carried out by the Christian missionaries initially. Undeniably, Christian missionaries' contributions and their keen interest to the Santal mythologies, legends, folk tales, songs, witchcraft, medicines, and daily life of Santals remain the foundation of Santali language and literature.

Keywords: Christian Missionaries, Santal Tribe, Culture, Traditions, Language and Literature

1.Introduction

There had been inadequacy in the growth of language and literature of many tribal communities in India and it still continues to be for most of them. Santali language and literature was one of them. The penetration of Christian missionaries within Santal belts in the early 19th century was an epoch-making event. Apart from the ecclesiastical ministries, the Christian missionaries involved themselves in research and writing on the Santal tribe. They too engaged Santals in recording as well and made them realize the beauty of their tradition and culture. On the other hand, the Christian missionaries got enormous help from some members of the Santal tribe to carry out their religious ministries and their writings very well. There is a list of "Christian missionaries" who are given the 'salute' and 'deep sense word of appreciation and gratitude till today by the Santal tribe for their contribution to Santali language and literature. There are even few libraries and research centers established by the Santal community to show the legacy of writings of few Christian missionaries for an e.g., "P O Bodding Memorial Trust" Dumka, Jharkhand, India and so on.

2.A Brief Description of the "Santal Tribe"

Santals are one of India's largest homogenous tribes, about 9.55 % of the country's Scheduled Tribes' population according to the 2001 census. This figure, however, does not include a fairly large number of Santals to be found in certain States like Assam and Meghalaya where they are not listed as Scheduled tribes. [1] Santals belong to the Kolarian and the Munda linguistic families, classified under the Austro-Asiatic group of languages (Dalton 1872:207; de Josselin de Jong 1965:363; Grierson1906:30; Risley1891:224). The bulk of their population is concentrated in the Indian states of Bihar, Bengal, and Orissa; the tea plantation areas of Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura; and the south-eastern part of Nepal, the north-western part of Bangladesh, and the southern part of Bhutan.[2] Santals are very conscious of their millenarian past. Their tradition tells of a glorious, distant past of continuous migrations. *Chai Champa*, their golden kingdom, was supposedly in Hazaribagh (Mahapatra 1986: 8; Sen 1984: 26). The Santals thus have firm belief in their having wandered for ages and over distances.[3] Santals are the largest homogenous tribal group of India who are considered to be the absolute originals of the land. Being one of the oldest *Adivasi* (Indigenous) communities, Santals have their own socio-political, economic, and cultural systems for which they have sentimental and emotional links, and they practice their rituals religiously even today. They are endowed with rich and glorious historical, cultural, and political heritages. Basic human values, which are essence of a primary human society like simplicity, truthfulness, respect for elders, caring and

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sharing, co-operation, communitarian lifestyle, subsistence economy, human spirituality, collective joy etc., are still visible in their society.[4]

3. Christian Missionaries' Writings on Santals - A Brief View

Rev. J. Phillips, who lived in Orissa, published a book entitled "*An Introduction to the Santal Language*" in 1852. It consists of a grammar, some reading and lessons and a Vocabulary. This is perhaps the first book in Santali that appeared in print. In E.G. Man published "*Sonthalia and the Sonthals*" containing some Santali songs, a grammatical sketch after Mr. Phillips and a list of words and phrases. Rev. E. L. Puxley edited "*A Vocabulary of the Santali Language*" in 1868 and that book he used the system of letters for Roman Hindusthani with a few omissions and additions. In 1873 Rev. Skrefsrud edited "*A Grammar of the Santhal Language*". Here he adopted the Roman alphabet following Mr. Puxley with several diacritical marks and most of the books published after it were in Roman scripts. This Book has been the foundation of all later works on the Santali language. In 1875 Rev. Mitchell published "*Santali Songs with Translations*" and Mr. Skrefsrud edited the book "*HorKoren mare hapramkoreak katha*" in 1887. This is very nice book on the traditions and institutions of Santals. Rev. T. Cole published "*A Santali Primer*" in 1896, Rev. M. Martin "*A English-Santali Dictionary*" in 1899. Rev. P. O. Bodding's famous grammar on Santali "*Materials for a Santali Grammar*" in two parts appeared 1922 and 1929 respectively and his monumental work "*A Santal Dictionary*" in five volumes was published by the University of Oslo in 1933. "*ChotraeDesmanjhi Reak Katha*" is a book published in 1917 which narrates facts about maintenance allowances to the Santals before the Santal rebellion of 1855, the Santal rebellion, things after the rebellion and the establishment of Assam Guma Colony. "*HorKanbiko*" Santals Folktales, was edited in 1924 and "*Kathamala*", Aesop's Fables in Santali was published in 1938. Rev. P.O. Bodding's "*A Grammar for Beginners*" appeared in 1929 and Dr. R. M. MacPhail's "*An Introduction to Santali*", Parts I and II was published in 1953.[5]

4. A Few Notable Christian Missionaries and Their Valuable Contributions on Santali Language and Literatures

4.1. Rev. J. Phillips

The Free Will Baptist Foreign Mission Society of New Hampshire in the USA sent two young Americans to Calcutta in 1836. They Eli Noyes and Jeremiah Phillips. From Calcutta the two men moved to Orissa where the Baptists from England had already started their work among the Oriya speaking people. Here, Noyes and Phillips came in contact with the Santals. After four years Noyes had to leave India, but Phillips stayed and learned Santali. The first attempt for a Santali grammar was made by Rev. J. Phillips (1852).[6] Mr. Phillips, in his book "*An Introduction to the Santal Language: Consisting of a Grammar, Reading Lessons, and a Vocabulary*" mentions "The Santal, having been hitherto an unwritten language, has, of course, no characters of its own, by which to represent articulate sounds. To supply this deficiency the Bengali alphabet has, for obvious reasons, been adopted".[7] I believe Rev. J. Phillips, who lived in Orissa and having come in contact with Santals, in 1852 published "*An Introduction to the Santal Language*". I have never succeeded in getting even a glimpse of this book and only known it from what is written "based" on this work in Sir W. W. Hunter's Annals of Rural Bengal. Mr. Phillips used the Bengali characters, and there are still found some who use these, the object being to make printed matter easily to Santals who know Bengali characters.[8]

4.2. Rev. L. O. Skrefsrud

Rev. Lars Olsen Skrefsrud was a member of "Northern Evangelical Church". He was born in Norway, in the year 1840. There were ups and downs in his earlier part of life. It is said that, in 1860, for some ill activities, he had to go to jail. A girl he had known, Anna Olsum, visited him in jail and had faith in him. In jail, he began to read religious books. After a talk with a visiting pastor, he dedicated himself to study to become a pastor. He was released in 1861, and went to the Gossner Missionary Society in Berlin, which accepted him as a trainee. In 1863, he left for India, where he joined the Baptist E. C. Johnson to work among the Santals of northern India. Anna Olsum joined him a year later and they were married.[9] In 1867, "Benagaria Mission" (then located in Bihar) was established among the Santals. Behind the establishment of Benagaria Mission, Skrefsrud had a great contribution.[10] In 1873 the Rev. L. O. Skrefsrud edited "*A Grammar of the Santali Language*", a work which has been the foundation of all the later works on this language. The oldest and most authoritative accounts of Santal history and traditions available so far are those told by "Kolean", an old preceptor of the Santals, to Rev. L. O. Skrefsrud (1840-1910), the pioneer Norwegian missionary to the Santals.[11] Lars O. Skrefsrud was a renowned speaker and highly respected religious leader, especially during the 1890s. N. N. Rønning, who wrote about Skrefsrud in a biography published by the Santal Mission in America, summarized that the respect was earned because he "went forth from poverty and prison and became one of the great missionaries of modern times." [12]

"He was a dynamic personality and powerful preacher. 'When [Skrefsrud] arose to speak, the land shook,' said a Santal elder. 'He was reared in the land of rocks and made a great contribution to Norway's shining saga at home and abroad,' wrote a Danish pastor. 'When he spoke, minutes sped as seconds, hours grew too brief; the fire in his eyes and the burning enthusiasm in his words captivated all who heard him,' declared a Norwegian educator." [13]

Mr. Skrefsrud has finely recorded the account of Santal history in the introductory part of his book "A Grammar of the Santal Language". Mr. Skrefsrud was an excellent linguist and practical phonetician.[14]

4.3. Rev. A Cambell

Rev. A. Campbell was born in 1845 in England. Alexander Duffak, the head of Free Church of Scotland, by whom Campbell was inspired to come to India for the missionary activities in 1873. While staying in Pachamba between 1873 to 1879, he came in contact with the Santals, then moved to Pokharia Mission in Manbhum (Dhanbad). Campbell established a printing machine, to bring out Santali books to facilitate Santal students to study in Santali language. He himself wrote the Santali books and got them printed from his own printing machine. Campbell's edited books are like "*Santali Parbaoputhi*" (I, II & III) (Santali Study Books, I, II & III). Besides these books, he brought out books like "*Paba Pobo*", "*Piyani Payan*", "*Kuli o Acur*", "*Thar Cetan Thar*". He translated the Old Testament of Bible into Santali language. Overall, the greatest contribution of Campbell was "*A Santali English Dictionary*" which was published in 1899. He composed many Santali songs.[15] Collection of Santali songs of Campbell and others were compiled together under the title "*Pokharia Sereñ Puthi*" (Pokharia Song Book), which was published in 1883.

4.4. Rev. P. O. Bodding

In January 1890, a young Norwegian priest came to India to help Skrefsrud and Børreson in their missionary work. His name was Paul Olaf Bodding (1865-1938). He devoted most of his time to the development of Santali literature and was responsible for improving written Santali. In the course of the more than thirty years in which he lived at Mohulpahari, in the Santal Parganas, Bodding published more than twenty-five works on the Santals. He was very much interested in the mythologies, legends, folk tales, songs, witchcraft, medicines, and daily life of Santals. This motivated him, like Skrefsrud, to search for a person who knew the traditions and customs of the people. About a year after arrival at Mohulpahari a man was sent to him in his work in connection with the Santali language.[16] This man was "Sagram Murmu" who hailed from a village in the Godda Subdivision of the Santal Parganas.

Bodding has contributed to Santali language and literature enormously. His works on Santali grammar and literature are extensively valued and appreciated in all over the world. In fact, Bodding gave a new phase to Santali literature. The Santali Magazine "*Hqr Hopon-ren Pera*" (the Guest of the Santals), which was brought out monthly from Benagaria Mission, was purely because of his love and passion for the growth of Santali language. Initially Rev. L. O. Skrefsrud was the editor of this magazine. It is said that this magazine was published regularly without any interruption from 1890 up to 1904. Bodding translated both the Old Testament and New Testament of the Bible into the Santali language by 1914. Bodding's Santali writings are like "*ku'k'li Puthi*" (the Interrogation Book), "*Sereñ Puthi*" (Song Book), "*Hqr Kanbi-ko*" (Santali Folktales), "*A Chapter on Santali Folklore*", "*Santali Folktales-I & II*", "*A Santali Dictionary- I, II, III, IV & V*", "*Materials for a Santali Grammar- I & II*", "*A Santali Grammar for Beginners*", "*Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore- I, II & III*", "*Traditional and Institutions of the Santals*" (A translation of *MareHapram Ko-reak Katha*).[17] Bodding collection which remains the world's largest collection of Santal culture and is currently owned and managed by the Museum of Cultural History and the National Library of Norway in Oslo.[18]

Conclusion

There is still a list of Christian missionaries and other foreigners who have written on the Santal tribe, but they are not mentioned here. It is crystal clear that Christian missionaries remained and worked among the Santals; besides ecclesiastical ministries; they kept busy themselves to collect each piece of Santal culture, Santal stories, Santal customary rites, ect. and put them in writing. This noble work of Christian missionaries ignited and opened the eyes of the Santals themselves mainly who were associated with missionary activities to preserve their culture and traditions. A number of Santals, in fact, started to write about their culture, traditions, ect. The list of Santal writers during above mentioned Christian missionaries are as follows: Biram Hansda, Dula Hembrom, Madhusudan Marandi, Dedem Hansda, Kalu Marandi, Shibu Besra, Khudia Marandi, Somai Murmu, Chaitanya Hembrom Kumar, Nimbai Murmu, Kalu Kisku, Jalpa Soren, Benjamin Soren, Bariar Soren, Surya Murmu, Baijanath Murmu, Sona Tudu and Samia Tudu. Generally, Christian Missionary period, Santal writers were

interested in composing the songs and publishing them.[19] Christianity and its concomitant literacy had a great deal to do with tribal awakening. Christian Missionaries had played a progressive and integrative role in terms of the growth of Santal culture, language, and literature. Work of Christian missionaries became the foundation and model for all works undertaken thereafter.

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