

## Contrarian Lives: Christians and Contemporary Protest in Jharkhand

Written by **Dr. Sushil J. Aaron**

Sushil J. Aaron, an independent researcher based in New Delhi, was the 2004/05 Sir Ratan Tata Fellow at the Asia Research Centre, LSE. He did his Ph.D. at the Jawaharlal Nehru University and his previous publications include *Christianity and Political Conflict in India* (RCSS: Colombo, 2002) and *Straddling Faultlines: India's Foreign Policy in the Greater Middle East* (CSH: New Delhi, 2003).

E-mail: [SushilAaron@yahoo.com](mailto:SushilAaron@yahoo.com)

The modern history of the Jharkhand region in India can be understood as a tale of incomplete pacification of 'tribal' communities by both the colonial and postcolonial regimes. Starting with the introduction of alien land tenure laws by the British, the increasing reach of inimical political and commercial interests, the tapping of huge mineral reserves as part of India's development march have adversely affected adivasi communities through land alienation, displacement and declining access to common property resources. Adivasis have responded through issue-based people's movements in various areas that oppose, for instance, reservoir dams, mining activity or forestry initiatives.

Christians have historically played a leading role in the clamour for tribal autonomy even if they account for only four percent of the population. This paper attempts to chart what the intensely socialized generation of Christian political activists starting in the 1930s has transmuted into and how activists and the organised church respond to changed circumstances. Based on field visits to Ranchi district, plus a case study of the Koel Karo agitation, this study assesses the role of Christian social movement activists – the nature and efficacy of their involvement, their equation with mainline churches and their relationship with non-Christian adivasi activists.

It argues that a sizeable Christian institutional presence creates the context for politicising activists and significantly sustains the discourse of subordination that undergirds tribal politics in the state. For these activists, attachment to land privileges adivasi identity over notions of religious belonging which, in turn, is arguably linked to distinct legacies of conversion. Christians are active in a range of informal protest associations that drive popular agitations and are involved in securing adivasi rights in the newly-formed state. For most part Christian activists are not driven by religious faith nor sponsored by foreign missionary groups and religious differences have not notably undermined collaboration with non-Christian adivasis. The church leadership is sympathetic to social movements overall but conservative cultural stances of the clergy inhibit collaborative scope. Understanding the dynamics of Christian social activism is, in part, significant owing to impending (mis)representations of social movements in a state marked by a stalemate between adivasi interests and the government's industrialising agenda amid the competing pressures of 'investor confidence', Hindu nationalism and Maoist insurgency.

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## Introduction

This paper is a preliminary attempt to assess the impact of Christian social activists on issues facing *adivasis* (tribals /aboriginal peoples) in the state of Jharkhand in contemporary India. This has been prompted by a few factors. One that academic studies gauging the contemporary interplay of Christian institutions and actors with socio-political issues are relatively few. Recent studies have, for instance, dealt with the indigenously framed cultural authenticity of Indian Christians (by demonstrating its non-Western origins) (Frykenberg 2003); have tackled the sociology of belief and Christian organisation (Robinson 2003) or reviewed the status of Christians in the making of the Indian Constitution and the internal (theological) debates within the community linked to conversion, the relationship with the dominant Hindu culture and its outlook towards pressing issues of caste and poverty (Kim 2003).

Meanwhile, historians continue to maintain polarised views on the effects of Christian conversion, institutions and missionary actors in the colonial period. The discipline is differentiated along those who see a Saidian continuity between missionary practice and colonial desire; contending that missionaries were so deeply implicated with the colonial agenda that they could not possibly undermine colonial interests. The contrarian tradition represented, in part, by Robert Frykenberg, G.A. Oddie, Duncan Forrester, Susan Billington Harper attempt to demonstrate the destabilizing effects of missionary practice, contending that a combination of outright missionary activism, Christian belief and newer modes of social organization through institution building have unsettled pre-existing social orders. They argue that Christian missions during colonial rule had democratising impacts on a number of exploitative contexts such as the case of Indigo planters in Bengal, caste-based oppression in south India – as those of the Shanars, Pariahs and Pulayas in the Travancore state and the various untouchable castes in the ‘Telugu country’ etc.<sup>1</sup>

Amid this there is demonstrable lack of chronicling the activist agenda of Indian Christians including, for instance, the mobilisation of subordinate groups such as *dalits* (former untouchable castes) in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, the dynamics of ethnicity, militancy and faith in Northeast India, and the effect of missionary societies in the adivasi heartland of central India

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Eric Frykenberg, (2002), *Christians and Missionaries in India: Cross-Cultural Communication since 1500*. Richmond: Curzon; G. A. Oddie (1979), *Social Protest In India: British Protestant Missionaries And Social Reforms, 1850-1900*, New Delhi: 1979; Duncan B. Forrester (1980), *Caste And Christianity: Attitudes And Policies On Caste Of Anglo-Saxon Protestant Missions In India*, London: Curzon Press; Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India: The Church Missionary Society in South Travancore in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, New Delhi: Manohar, 1989 and Susan Billington Harper (2000), *In The Shadow Of The Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India*, Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. That Christian mission, not colonialism, altered Indian social practice has come to receive a measure of acceptance. Copley writes, “At no stage did the Empire ever challenge Indian religions and social institutions, and above all, caste, in the way Mission did. There was a fierceness and wide scope to the challenge posed by Mission which compels its discussion as a distinctive ideology.” (Copley 1998: 6). The ameliorative impact of Christian societies among marginalised communities has received greater recognition in recent years, principally occasionally by Hindu nationalist rhetoric and attacks on Christian minorities. Historian Sumit Sarkar writes: “[M]issionary complicity with colonialism in India has also been much exaggerated and simplified. Early Company rulers like Hastings and Cornwallis, far from encouraging missionaries, often developed close collaborative relations with orthodox Brahman literati, and the Baptist mission had to set up its first outpost in Serampur, then outside British Bengal. Later, too, there have been many missionary critics of colonial policies. Above all, at the other end of the social scale, recent historical research is increasingly highlighting the extent to which sustained Christian philanthropic and educational work have had an empowering impact on significant sections of adivasis, dalits and poor and subordinated groups in general.” Sumit Sarkar, ‘Conversions and the Sangh Parivar’, *The Hindu*, 9 November 1999.

ranging from south Gujarat to Orissa. This is a striking deficiency considering the magnified role of Christians in public discourse owing to the confrontation between an activist Christianity and Hindu nationalism, particularly after 1998.<sup>2</sup> As noted this contest of social forces has not been adequately mapped, partly because of an intellectual genealogy of disdain for religion in general, and Christianity in particular. Admittedly though, besides poor funding, researching Christianity and politics sometimes involves the attendant disadvantages of investigating obscure religious groupings owing to the bewildering proliferation of Christian societies, particularly on the Protestant evangelical side, and their unwillingness to be amenable to academic inquiry owing to either tenuous political contexts or ambiguous sources of funding.

This paper looks at the nature of Christian social activism and its role in the various social movements that endeavour to restore adivasi rights in Jharkhand. The underlying motif of these struggles is two fold: one, to resist the encroachment on adivasi land and common property resources through frenetic industrialisation that threaten their livelihood and, secondly, to campaign for adivasi control over state resources, through a focus on effecting the principles of decentralisation by granting power to traditional adivasi self-governing institutions. It is argued here that the institutional advantage of Christian actors in league with majority *sarna* (i.e. non-Christian adivasi) activists constitutes a frontline for tribal struggles against inimical interests. Despite the political limits of what Stuart Corbridge calls the 'ideology of tribal economy and society', that very ideology is being deployed to secure minimalist ends for adivasi communities in areas of tribal concentration.

Christian activists have long been active in the modern history of Chotanagpur (as the region was traditionally known). An entire generation of Christian tribal politicians, emerging from a comparatively earlier access to education, founded and established the movement for state autonomy that started in the late 1930s, with the active support of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church. Christian politicians dominated political associations like the Adivasi Mahasabha and the subsequent Jharkhand Party which became the largest opposition entity in the Bihar Assembly in the 1950s with figures like Jaipal Singh, Theodore Surin, Ignace Beck, Paul Dayal, Julius Tigga, Boniface Lakra, Samuel Purti, N.E. Horo, and Justin Richard working in tandem with prominent non-Christians leaders like Bandiram Oraon, Theble Oraon and Kartik Oraon.<sup>3</sup> In fact, till the 1980s, when the demand for a separate statehood for Jharkhand got wider currency among the non-tribals, the movement was reportedly dismissed as being a 'Christian conspiracy' or as the work of the 'Fathers'. There is a sense now that Christian activism has retreated and been superseded by the frenetic nature of ethnoregionalist clamour starting with the merger of the Jharkhand Party into the Congress Party in 1963 and later splitting into various factions, the locus of social movement activity shifting to agrarian struggles in the Santal Parganas led by Shibu Soren's Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) in the mid 1970s,

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<sup>2</sup> This phase was inaugurated by the attacks on Christian churches in the Dangs district of Gujarat in December 1998 and 1999, the burning of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons in January 1999 and the heated debate on conversions that followed culminating in a controversial visit to India of Pope John Paul II in November 2000 where he expressed his hope that the new millennium will yield a 'harvest of faith'. Indian evangelicalism has been assailed in some quarters for the unthinking embrace of fundamentalist values of American evangelicals that is said to not only foster a degree of financial dependence but also the adoption of elements of a triumphalist illiberal religiosity that is a feature of some of its strands. An extended expose titled "George Bush Has a Big Conversion Agenda in India," *Tehelka*, February 7, 2004, is representative of the outrage caused (in liberal circles) by the interest of American evangelicals in converting India.

<sup>3</sup> See chapter 2 in Agapit Tirkey, *Jharkhand Movement: A Study of its Dynamics*, (New Delhi: Other Media Communications, 2002). chapter 2 and L. P. Vidyarthi and K. N. Sahay, *The Dynamics of Tribal Leadership in Bihar* (Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, 1978).

the agitationist phase of the All Jharkhand Students Union (AJSU) in the mid 1980s leading to the formation of the Jharkhand Area Autonomous Council in 1995 prior to the formation of the Jharkhand state in November 2000.<sup>4</sup> This paper attempts to chart what the intensely socialized generation of Christian political activists in the 1950s and 1960s has mutated into and how the organized church has responded to the changed circumstances.

### Situating adivasi resistance

A study of Christian activism is particularly central to the question of adivasi political coherence in contemporary Jharkhand whose politics is characterised by a tension between, as noted, pervasive adivasi disenchantment and the developmentalist urge of a political class that has a weak hold on state power. Adivasi groups feel cheated of state power having watched parties of 'dikus' (outsiders) like the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) bandwagon on a momentum for statehood that they created till the early 1990s only to ultimately lose political power. (To illustrate the antagonism towards a separate state for Jharkhand among non-tribals, adivasi auto drivers in Ranchi were reportedly harassed frequently by the police for putting up 'Jai Jharkhand' or 'Johar!' stickers on their vehicles.) The persistent sympathy among adivasis for Shibu Soren despite the dubious circumstances in which he was installed as Chief Minister by the state Governor briefly in February 2005, without demonstrable support of legislative majority, is representative of that urge to see genuine adivasi rule in Jharkhand.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile BJP-led regimes, which ruled the state from 2000-2006, have embarked on an industrialising agenda geared to shore its electoral prospects and placate corporate backers and have thereby encountered resistance from adivasi groups.<sup>6</sup> The new Industrial Policy, that the BJP-led government unveiled in 2001, promised an investment friendly climate for foreign companies in a host of areas including power and 'mineral development' that would entail further appropriation of adivasi land – principally through the Land Acquisition Act (1894) that authorised the government to take over land for public purposes.<sup>7</sup> This is inevitable because Jharkhand has 38 percent of India's mineral wealth. It has 33 % of India's coal, 47% of mica, 34% of copper, 24% iron ore, 17% of graphite in India.<sup>8</sup> In May 2005, the BJP-led government hired McKinsey consultants to draw a road map for mineral development that was expected to advance the agenda of the industrial policy.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>For a close reading of internal dynamics in the Jharkhand autonomy movement, see Amit Prakash, *Jharkhand: Politics of Development and Identity* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001); chapters 3-5 in Turkey, *Jharkhand Movement: A Study of its Dynamics*, op.cit., K. S. Singh, 'Tribal Autonomy Movements in Chotanagpur', in K. S. Singh (ed.) *Tribal Movements in India, Vol. 2* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1983), 1-29; and chapter 4 titled 'The Tradition of Protest' in Susana Devalle, *Discourses of Ethnicity: Culture and Protest in Jharkhand*, (New Delhi: Sage, 1992), 111-149.

<sup>5</sup> The Governor of Jharkhand invited Soren to form the government in March 2005 even though the JMM-Congress alliance had fewer legislators than the BJP-led Hindu nationalist alliance. Soren resigned soon after he failed to win a trust vote in the legislature. See Purnima Tripathi, 'Stuck in Controversy', *Frontline*, 12-25 March 2005 at <http://www.flonnet.com/fl2206/stories/20050325002002500.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Three Chief Ministers from BJP were at the helm in Jharkhand from November 2000-September 2006. Madhu Koda, India's first non-party 'independent' Chief Minister took over in September 2006, underlining the issue of political division in the state.

<sup>7</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land\\_Acquisition\\_Act](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_Acquisition_Act) for a summary of its provisions and <http://dolr.nic.in/hyperlink/acq.htm> for full text of the Act.

<sup>8</sup> According to the CII, diamond major De Beers and 11 other companies have submitted application to undertake aerial survey to locate mineral and metal concentration in the state. See Confederation of Indian Industry report 'Business opportunities in Jharkhand: A Study' at <http://www.cionline.org/Eastern/regionalfocus/853/images/Jharkhand.pdf> accessed 24 May 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Ambar Singh Roy, 'IL&FS, McKinsey to draw Jharkhand minerals, farm sector roadmap', *Business Line*, 14 May 2005. Also see 'CM seeks McKinsey hand' at

The Industrial Policy document pointedly does not mention the phrase ‘Scheduled Areas’ that enjoy special constitutionally protected measures for adivasis. The new policy intends to form a high level committee to review the applicability and relevance of certain Acts obliquely including the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act, the principal protective legal instrument for safeguarding adivasi interests in the province.<sup>10</sup> It also says wasteland / degraded forest may be made available by the State government which would doubtless spark fresh agitations should such measures be effected. This is totally contrary to provision of existing tenancy acts.<sup>11</sup>

Ongoing industrialising projects have provoked several agitations owing to displacement of adivasis by alleged ‘land grabbing’ policies. A few illustrative instances would include the movement against the ‘Pilot Project Netarhat Field Firing Range’.<sup>12</sup> In 2004 the Union government issued a notification of 1471 square kilometres for the army firing range and its plans to acquire land for the impact area of 188 square kilometres and camping ground of 18 square kilometres in area across Latehar and Gumla districts which would affect 262,853 people of whom 90 percent (236567) are tribals. Activists allege that the choice of the area for a firing range was repeatedly moved from a non-scheduled area to a tribal dominated area. Locals have been resisting land survey attempts since 1993 and in January and August 2004, the Army fixed dates for firing practice forcing the evacuation of some 10000 people in winter and the hectic monsoon season.<sup>13</sup>

Another ongoing agitation has been waged by the Rajmahal Pahad Bachao Andolan in the Pachwara block of Pakur district against the acquisition of 1704 acres for captive coal mining by PANEM, a joint venture company forged by Punjab State Electricity Board and Eastern Minerals and Trading Agency (EMTA). The government acquired a total of 41 square kilometres

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[http://www.firstpeoplesfirst.in/index.php?subaction=showfull&id=1117176166&archive=&start\\_from=&ucat=6](http://www.firstpeoplesfirst.in/index.php?subaction=showfull&id=1117176166&archive=&start_from=&ucat=6)  
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<sup>10</sup> See Article 31.6 of *Industrial Policy of Jharkhand 2001*, Government of Jharkhand, Department of Industries, at <http://jharkhand.nic.in/governance/indpolicy.htm> or page 31 at

<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/APCITY/UNPAN015038.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> In at least one instance to confirm this, the Bihar government issued an order in 1978 to officials involved in survey and settlement operations. It said ‘the race there which cleared the forest, made cultivable land, established the villages for their children are the owners of the village.’ This is also confirmed in Para 45 of the settlement of Porahat territory. It says, ‘a second main difference between the Munda Khuntkatti intact village of the Porahat and the Ranchi type is that in Ranchi the jungles and waste lands are the property of the Khuntkatti.’ See ‘Instruction for the Recording of the Lands of the Adivasis of Mundari Khuntkatti and Bhuinhari tenants,’ Government of Bihar order, dated 23 February 1978. I’m grateful to PNS Surin, retired Additional Magistrate, Bihar Administrative Service, for drawing my attention to this order. Reid’s settlement Ranchi district also confirms this. ‘There is no part of the Ranchi district in which the aborigines have succeeded in retaining any considerable share of their proprietary rights in the soil, save a small are in the present Khunti subdivision, where the Mundari khuntkattidars have succeeded in retaining their ancient rights unimpaired to this day. Mundari khuntkatti tenancy is now not transferable by sale, save in the special cases referred to in Section 240 of the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act.’ J. Reid, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Ranchi*, Calcutta: Government of Bengal Press, 1912, p. 14. For the Porahat settlement see F.E.A. Taylor, *Final Report on the Revision Survey and Settlement Operation of Porahat Estate, District Singbhum, 1928-32*, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> For a sample of ongoing land related anti-mining movements and organisations see <http://www.birsa.in/campaigns.htm>. An overview of adivasi human development indicators in Jharkhand and patterns of displacement linked to development schemes is available at Stan Swamy, ‘Dignity and Basic Rights of Jharkhandis,’ *Communalism Combat*, February-March 2004, Vol. 10, No. 96, at <http://www.sabrang.com/cc/archive/2004/mar04/cover8.html> accessed 13 February 2005.

<sup>13</sup> See *Visthapan ka Aathank: Pilot Project Netarhat Jan Andolan* (Latehar: Kendriya Jan Sangharsh Samiti: 2005) and ‘Jharkhand tribals protest army firing range’ <http://indiaenews.com/2006-08/19543-jharkhand-tribals-protest-army-firing.htm>, posted 2 September 2006.



in the area displacing 250 families who have resisted this fiercely with the aid of civil liberties organisations.<sup>14</sup> This has provoked a fairly brutal police crackdown allegedly at the behest of the company with the movement's leaders being arrested on trumped up charges. In fact the one individual who spent the longest prison sentence of 16 months owing to the agitation was a schoolteacher, Joseph Soren, who is also the local Pentecostal minister.<sup>15</sup> The agitation against the Koel Karo Hydroelectric Power Corporation that would have displaced 16000 families in 256 villages is another significant anti-dam movement stretching over 30 years, which we will return to later as it is located in an area of Christian concentration.

It is easy to dismiss such movements as the inevitable by-product of uneven development, particularly when set against the gains that adivasis in Jharkhand have made since independence. A misreading of Stuart Corbridge's scholarship, for instance, might lead one to doubt the objective conditions that sustain adivasi struggles in Jharkhand. In various papers over the last 25 years characterized by a strong empiricist flavour, Corbridge has demonstrated that the tribal component in Chotanagpur has not only weakened demographically in relation to non-adivasi communities but has also experienced internal class differentiation that militates against effective pan-tribal mobilization. In doing so Corbridge has effectively undermined Myron Weiner's 'sons of the soil' model and the 'internal colonialism' model of ethnoregionalism that drew attention to the aboriginal disaffection toward the industrializing Nehruvian developmentalist narrative and the exploitative presence of 'outsiders' that were causing irreparable damage to adivasi livelihoods, communities and habitat.

The substantive thrust of the Corbridgian corpus is that adivasis categorised as Scheduled Tribes (STs) were never a majority in the region to begin with since independence. He demonstrates that adivasis benefited from job reservations granted to STs and made strides towards achieving a middle class status that has allowed them to speculate in the land market etc; a process corresponded by the influx of non-adivasi 'outsiders' principally from north Bihar. All this has unsettled the social and spatial ordering of adivasi communities that unravels notions of ethnic closure, simplicity, geographical isolation that undergird what he calls the 'ideology of tribal economy and society' that has sustained ethnic politics in the region.<sup>16</sup> A combination of adivasi differentiation (through enlarged access to education and jobs) and demographic weakness thus provides a stronger account, Corbridge reckons, of the various failures of the autonomy movement than, simply, a factional model of Jharkhandi politics.

Be that as it may, Corbridge's work should be read as a structural account for Jharkhand movement's lack of political traction over the years rather than as evidence for the historical dissolution of core adivasi concerns relating to '*jal, jungle, zameen*' (water, forests and land). In fact, Corbridge is careful to point out that the reservations 'has not brought a tribal middle class into existence; rather it has been captured by a pre-existing tribal elite', which is predominantly male<sup>17</sup> and many of whom originate in urban areas (Corbridge 2000: 64). To make up for

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<sup>14</sup> For details of the issues see K. Balchand, 'Tribals up in arms in Jharkhand', *The Hindu*, 3 October 2003 and Stan Swamy, 'An Alternate People's Policy on Rehabilitation' at <http://pucl.net/kitspress/?p=18>, accessed 3 September 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with activists, Ranchi, April 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Stuart Corbridge's articles referred to in this section are: 'Ousting Singbonga: The Struggle for India's Jharkhand', in P. Robb (ed.), *Dalit Movements and Meanings of Labour in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993, 153-82; 'Competing Inequalities: The Scheduled Tribes and the Reservations System in India's Jharkhand', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 2000, 59: 62-85 and 'The Continuing Struggle for India's Jharkhand: Democracy, Decentralization and the Politics of Names and Numbers', *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 2002, 40 (3): 55-71.

<sup>17</sup> Women are likely to get into Class III jobs as higher qualified posts are perceived as gender neutral while jobs like peons, clerks, cooks or gardeners are still coded as 'male jobs' (Corbridge 2000: 76)

'hideously dated and incomplete' official data, he computes the nature of tribal class differentiation on the basis of interviewing 205 respondents from 185 households working in public sector concerns. He puts the tribal middle class component at 10 to 15 percent in Ranchi and Singhbhum districts. Even though there is an increasing incidence of tribals appearing for Class I and Class II jobs as educational access increases, 'the system is not delivering Class I and Class II jobs to tribals in way envisioned by the framers of the Constitution (ibid: 80). He notes that for many years the Scheduled Tribes have failed to fill their complements of government jobs and that 'most of the jobs filled were in Class III and (more so) Class IV (ibid: 70). His sample leads him to believe that poorer educated tribals are relatively more represented in Class II jobs than Class IV jobs, but considers this less significant in view of the overall situation that *middle class tribal families* are more likely to get into Class IV jobs (constables, forest guards, sweepers, gardeners etc) than Class II jobs (Block Development Officer, heads of police station etc) [ibid: 76, emphasis mine]. Notably, tribals are 'still excluded' from private labour markets and to indicate the scale of difference that quotas have made, Corbridge states that 'for every 1,000 STs in reserved jobs there must be almost 100,000 not so employed' (ibid: 79).

Thus, even though Corbridge remains a persistent critic of stereotypical accounts of tribal communities by focusing on internal differentiation, he nonetheless sets them against the backdrop of various dimensions of adivasi exclusion in the region. While establishing a critical distance from the three models of ethnoregionalism that he evaluates, Corbridge does affirm some of their claims about the dismal conditions of the adivasis. For instance, he writes in a 1993 essay in a fashion reminiscent of the 'internal colonialism' thesis: 'Although a committed local opposition still exists, the Jharkhand is becoming a land of dams and mines, of timber plantations, factories and army units. Given the power of the state, the land of the forests may soon be no more (Corbridge 1993: 139). Nearly a decade later, he cannot 'deny that large numbers of adivasi people have been marginalized by the processes of economic development...or have been its major victims in terms of loss of lands' (Corbridge 2002: 63).

Adivasi life is thus beset by the paradox of the state's developmental inadequacy and its excessive coercive capacity that has its roots in or is, alternatively, exacerbated by illiberal, exploitative social groups. This translates into struggles over adivasi lands at both a personal and collective plane. Thus some of the figures are compelling, particularly in view of the resource extraction that Jharkhand has been subject to over the last century. Like in the rest of adivasi heartland from northern Maharashtra, Gujarat through Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, the upper reaches of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa, tribals have been the principal victims of India's industrial march through dispossession of land, inadequate or non-existent rehabilitation programmes, poor levels of literacy, continued subjection to rapacious interests in the form of landlords, moneylenders or labour middlemen (to name a few) and abysmal working conditions, particularly as informal labour, in industrial activity ranging from mining, road building, construction, cement factories, stone breaking etc.<sup>18</sup> In Jharkhand, land alienation is providing

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Fernandes, a Jesuit scholar/activist, has memorably said that in post independence, *national development and tribal deprivation* have become synonymous (Fernandes 1992). Adivasis constitute 40 percent of the displaced persons owing to developmental projects though their share of the national population is only 8 percent. Their human development status is appalling even by Indian standards. According to the 1991 census, *adivasi* literacy rate is 23.63 percent, far lower than the general population (52.21) and less than that of the lower castes (30.6). The literacy rate of rural *adivasi* women is 12.74 percent. *Adivasis* are the poorest social group in the country; in 1987-88, 52.6 percent were below the poverty line, compared to 33.4 percent for the general population. *Adivasis* are badly under-represented in the governmental workforce. The percentages of scheduled tribes in type A, B, C, and D government employment respectively has been 2.89, 2.68, 5.69 and 6.48: notably a fraction of 8 percent, in upper grades (Xaxa 2001). State acquisition of land for development projects has de-recognised corporate rights over land-

the context for anti-industrialisation movements which affects both individuals and communities. It is a recurring grievance in the rural areas of Ranchi district, including the Mundari Khuntkatti areas in the Khunti subdivision which have been tackled here. As a retired administrator turned activist narrates there are at least five signature scenarios under which land is grabbed from adivasis – that is worth recalling here.<sup>19</sup>

### **Narratives of land seizure**

#### 1<sup>st</sup> scenario: Outright seizure

A 'diku' (or non-adivasi) zamindar, shopkeeper or moneylender arrives with musclemen to grab land. Prior to this, the *darogar* (sub-inspector of police station) is bribed to ensure that no first information report (FIR) is recorded. The policeman takes a bribe from the adivasi to lodge the FIR and then records false entries to weaken the victim's case just in case it should ever go to court. This is reportedly still a common feature in urban areas.

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> scenario: Extorting illiterates

Cash-strapped adivasis often resort to loans from moneylenders to furnish school fees for children or for marriage related expenses etc. Inevitably they have nothing except but land to offer as collateral. The moneylender then prepares a receipt / mortgage deed which has three possible time-bound variations – a two year loan, a 'not exceeding five years' loan and a usufruct mortgage not exceeding seven years. The fraud is perpetrated by deliberately not recording the date of deed or omitting the deadline for repayment. By omitting the date, the creditor is in a position to hold on to the land till the debtor loses his patience, at which point the date can be inserted to extend the 'agreement.' Section 71A of the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act empowers the Deputy Commissioner to restore land to the adivasi even if he has mortgaged his land, provided he applies for restoration of land *within three years* of the end of the mortgage agreement. Many adivasis are unaware of this rule and often end up going after three years even if the date is on the agreement. In fact, the moneylender is likely to exploit the traditional links with the adivasi (that facilitates the transaction in the first place) by gently evading attempts by the latter to repay the loan within three years of the end of the agreement. This would typically involve cajoling the adivasi through exaggerated, contrived warmth as in: 'what's the hurry, keep it, I'll take it later.' The Deputy Commissioner often expresses his helplessness to give back the land after three years have passed.

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> scenario:

This involves a diku keeping a tribal concubine who keeps the affair a secret from her family or village. He then gives cash to her to go and purchase tribal land in her name. The girl is usually caught between an incensed neighbourhood and a man who will not own up to her in his own community by marrying her. After a while she pleads with her family to let her go and keep the land after which the land moves into the hands of the diku.

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based resources on which 15 million Indian *adivasis* currently depend, snatching between 40 and 80 percent of total tribal land resources without compensation (Pathy 1998: 277).

<sup>19</sup> I'm grateful to PNS Surin, retired Additional Magistrate, Bihar Administrative Service, for outlining these scenarios that confronts adivasis regularly.

4<sup>th</sup> scenario:

In mining areas, it is common to find adivasi owned land hemmed in by mining activity. It is also common to find Mining Corporation of India leasing mining licenses to *dikus* (e.g. marwaris, outsiders). The diku will then start encroaching on adivasi land, cajoling him to mine just a little more and periodically providing cash advances not to go to court. Over a period of time, the adivasi land is vacated by attrition.

5<sup>th</sup> scenario:

The Forest Department has taken over vast tracts of zamindari land in Jharkhand and declared it as reserved or protected forest. These include Mundari Khuntkatti areas which have never been under zamindari control, but the Forest Department, for instance, was giving the impression to a World Bank consultation in 2004 that Khuntkatti land too was reserved forest which is untrue.<sup>20</sup>

As noted earlier, people's movements are up against a pro-liberalisation momentum embraced by successive regimes in the state. Christian presence in these movements adds another dimension to the social conflict in view of Hindu nationalism own cultural agenda that aims to 'Hinduise' tribals. Christian adivasis have been targeted by Hindu nationalists as part of a conventional political strategy to stigmatise minority groups and forge a Hinduised constituency for its electoral purposes.

Hindu nationalist groups like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (VKP) have made considerable inroads in Jharkhand, backed by state patronage as has been the case since the BJP came to power at the Centre in 1999. They are, in a sense, mimicking Christian missionary strategies by providing services in the fields of education and health. Numerous primary schools have been started by Hindu nationalist groups some allegedly using funds from Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan scheme of the central government along with requisite infrastructure like buildings, hostels etc. An April 2004 issue of *The Organiser*, the premier organ of the Hindu nationalist family of organisations, says that the RSS runs 550 Shakhnas held in 422 places and that 'the work of associated organization like Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra, VHP, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarti Parishad (ABVP), Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, Bharatiya Kisan Sangh and others is very effective. It says the work of Vanvasi Kalyan Kendra is strongest as it runs over 1300 projects while the VHP also runs more than 1000 service projects.<sup>21</sup> It has pushed other elements of its cultural agenda through the BJP-led coalition government led by Chief Minister Arjun Munda. In August 2006 it attempted to push through anti-conversion legislation that is now in force in four (BJP-ruled or allied) states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Gujarat. (The move was opposed by its coalition partner Janata Dal [U].<sup>22</sup>) The government also passed anti-cow slaughter legislation, one of

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with PNS Surin, April 2005.

<sup>21</sup> 'In Jharkhand: Sangh combating missionary menace: Interview with Shreesh Devpujari, prant pracharak of Jharkhand (former personal secretary to Raju Bhaiyya, sarsangchalak)', *Organiser*, 11 April 2004, p. 13. Also see Neena Vyas, 'RSS has highest stake in Jharkhand', *The Hindu*, 23 January 2005.

<sup>22</sup> "There's no question of supporting any BJP move to bring the anti-conversion bill," said Jareshwar Mahata, head of state unit of JD (U). 'Church happy as Conversion Bill threatens Jharkhand state's coalition government, at <http://www.theindiancatholic.com/newsread.asp?nid=3187>, posted 31 August 2006.

BJP's pet issues nationwide, while the Chief Minister issued fresh strictures to district administrations to ensure strict implementation of the law.<sup>23</sup>

As said, Christian activism is a key aspect of Jharkhand's vibrant social movement activism that occasionally coincides spatially with the activity of Maoists guerrillas – who are now widely recognised as serious security threat by the political leadership and government agencies.<sup>24</sup> Hindu nationalists have long blamed 'the Church' for Jharkhand's political disorder – be it the movement for autonomy that culminated in statehood in 2000 or in assailing it for conversionary practices. Maoists and social movement activists operate in the same sphere and there is every possibility that state actors and Hindu nationalists tar Christian activism with the Maoist brush just as the Church's 'linkages' with militancy in the Northeast were well-advertised.

This study argues, through qualitative inference, that even though the Church as an institution (in all its denominational forms) has been unwilling to take up socio-political causes actively, Christian activists play a significant and often a leading role in various adivasi social movements in contemporary Jharkhand. Several factors have contributed to that possibility. First is the very 'tradition of protest' in Chota Nagpur that has seen several adivasi revolts against colonial rulers and local elites since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>25</sup> Through institutional building that Church has built on that legacy. The educational apparatus of the Church across the state; the actively transmitted legacy of Christian political involvement in the movement for autonomy since the late 1930s, the persistent attempts by non-tribal outsiders to exploit adivasis provide the context for the continuing politicisation of youth that finds expression in the various movements to protect adivasi rights. The chronological advantage that Christian adivasis had in acclimatising to forms of pan local associational life through Church activity, in accessing missionary education and government jobs still holds and helps in current mobilization ventures, as we shall see later. This is achieved through a range of informal associations, a feature of Jharkhandi civil society – particularly in Ranchi district – that are formed to fight specific struggles such as Jharkhand Justice Forum, Koel Karo Jan Sangathan (KKJS), Jharkhand Mines Area Coordination Committee (JMACC), Rajmahal Virodhi Andolan etc.

A significant portion of effective mobilization occurs apart from the officially registered NGOs thus eluding state legibility and control. There are prominent civil society institutions like the Bindrai Institute for Research Study and Action (BIRSA), Indian Confederation of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (ICITP), and the Xavier's Institute of Social Sciences (XISS) to be sure. But of particular interest for this study are the networks of Jesuit, Protestant and sarna activists who are able to forge protest clusters quickly and coordinate advocacy and mobilization strategies

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<sup>23</sup> 'Jharkhand to strictly implement anti-cow slaughter law', IANS report at <http://www.dnaindia.com/report.asp?NewsID=1049293>, posted 25 August 2006. The Chief Minister also announced plans to make singing of the Vande Mataram compulsory in educational institutions. 'Jharkhand Government to make singing of Vande Mataram mandatory', The Hindustan Times (Delhi), 31 August 2006.

<sup>24</sup> The Union government has recently agreed to allow air support for anti-Naxal operations in six states including Jharkhand, a remarkable development for the tribal heartland. Only helicopters have been allowed in the first instance; the state government is authorized to hire them from private operators. This does speculatively set the stage for future involvement of the Indian Air Force. The announcement followed a flurry of high level meetings to discuss Maoist violence, including a meeting of Chief Ministers of affected states convened by the Prime Minister and consultations of the Chief Secretaries and police chiefs of 13 states with the Union Home Secretary. See 'State gets copters to fight Naxals', *The Economic Times*, 2 September 2006 and 'PM convenes meeting of Chief Ministers', *Times of India*, 3 September 2006. For official and provisional data on violence caused by Maoist activity in Jharkhand see [http://www.satp.org/satporgetp/countries/india/maoist/data\\_sheets/fatalitiesnaxal.htm](http://www.satp.org/satporgetp/countries/india/maoist/data_sheets/fatalitiesnaxal.htm). Also see news reports on naxalite activity in Jharkhand see <http://www.rediff.com/news/jharkhan.htm>

<sup>25</sup> The prominent uprisings include the Kol insurrection of 1831-32, the Santhal revolt of 1855-56, the Sardari Larai movement 1858-1890, the millennial movement led by Birsa Munda (1874-1901).



against the state or industrial projects. Importantly, these networks operate beyond the purview of the established Church institutions and in opposition to the conservative instincts of the local clergy, thus initiating new struggles of authority within Christian communities—in part explaining the limited electoral impact of these activists even if they can enlist support for political agitations.

A couple of clarifications: When this paper talks of ‘Christian’ activists it merely speaks in an ascriptive sense. I am mostly referring to groups of individual Protestant and Catholic activists who come together to launch popular agitations. They include politically active students, rural activists, Jesuit priests, lay urban professionals involved in social action who pool in their resources along with non-Christian *sarna* adivasis to support, mobilise, or lead adivasi agitations. Apart from the rare exception, their activism is not a religiously defined one; it is provoked by being politicised through transmission of the discourse of dispossession and the agitational climate of modern Jharkhand history.

As noted, Christian social activism does not arguably appear to be religiously defined social action. In fact Christian conversion in Chota Nagpur has been arguably characterised by relatively poor transmission of religious content, particularly among the Munda tribe. An acute awareness of adivasi history and cultural practice supersedes the Christian element in the self-construction of a Christian adivasi activist particularly. This is not to say that there is no awareness of religious differentiation; indeed there is, but pressures from without (i.e. the state and dikus [outsiders]) serves to reinforce the discourse of subordination that privileges adivasi identity over a sense of religious difference.<sup>26</sup> To be sure, the organised Church, as represented through the dominant Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Anglican streams, have had an active involvement in Chota Nagpur politics since the region found itself caught up in the devolutionary struggles that India went through since early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>27</sup>

This paper deals with contemporary social movement actors who work through informal or semi-informal groupings while tackling various the challenges of adivasi communities. A striking feature of social movement activism in Jharkhand is the sheer number of informal associations of activists who form a sort of mobile vanguard to support people agitations. These coalitions build on or mobilise grassroots support and include activists from various backgrounds: lawyers, *sarna* youth, Jesuits, protestant lay professionals, students and women – all of whom have varying levels of involvement in ‘people’s movements.’ Popular movements require different layers of actors performing various functions of rallying crowds, coordinate meetings in different locations (in forested areas), framing petitions and initiate litigation for short-term relief, generate media awareness, solicit support of sympathetic politicians and urban civil society professionals who have national and transnational network capital etc. In Jharkhand, civil society activism is marked by a remarkable concert of these activists who blend well with village level leadership in offering resistance. Some of these actors in the Christian sphere are reviewed here.

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<sup>26</sup> Awareness of religious difference is exacerbated by the cultural prescriptions of churches which will be discussed below.

<sup>27</sup> A comprehensive account of this phenomenon is well beyond the scope of this study. This paper does not deal with prominent Roman Catholic institutions in Jharkhand like the Jesuit-run Xavier’s Institute of Social Services (XISS) whose curriculum in its Masters programs, various developmental programmes in literacy, health and micro-credit, advocacy in spheres of social justice and political decentralization for many years now, deserve a separate extended study. Anirudh Prasad has reviewed the developmental interventions of some organizations in his *Alleviating Hunger: Challenge for the New Millenium* (New Delhi: ISPCK, 2001).

This account is not an anthropology of the protest subculture in Jharkhand; its methodological limitations have elided themes such as impact of popular agitations on hierarchies among adivasi communities (viz. do they reinforce or undermine existing elite structures). How adivasi claims to self-rule intersects the issue of gender has also not been addressed. It has restricted itself to the political orientation of Christian organisations and activists and demonstrated its involvement in a range of social movement settings – from popular agitations fighting against displacement caused by investment-friendly climate to evolving constructions of tribal identity in order to secure adivasi interests in the recently-created state and mobilising support to arrest the Hindu nationalist agenda.

This study is based on a four week field trip (in September 2004 and March-April 2005) in Ranchi district conducting interviews with Christian clergy from the three main denominations— the Roman Catholic Church, Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church (GELC) and the Church of North India. Other interlocutors included Christian and non-Christian adivasi activists in two prominent ongoing agitations (against the Netarhat Field Firing Pilot Project and the Koel Karo Hydroelectric Power Project); Jesuits priests involved in these movements besides political activists and village leaders in Ranchi city and the south/south-western part of Ranchi district, which has a significant Christian concentration of mostly Munda adivasis.<sup>28</sup> Before progressing further, a digression on Christianity in modern Chota Nagpur history is perhaps in order to situate contemporary modes of activism.

### Christianity in Chota Nagpur history

Historically, Christianity has had a greater impact on Chota Nagpur than its current level of adherents (4.05 percent of Jharkhand's population) would suggest. Like some of its other encounters in India, in the case of the abolition of sati or tackling the improvidence of 'depressed castes' or peasant cultivators in Bengal, missionary Christianity found itself assuming extra evangelical concerns after arriving with implacable confidence in the inexorable power of itinerant preaching. When the first four German missionaries sent by the Lutheran Mission arrived in 1845, Chota Nagpur was experiencing the alternating throes of episodic adivasi revolts and fervent pacification attempts by the British. This had much to do with the alienation of adivasi land through the effect of the Permanent Settlement of 1793, which usurped the communal ownership of adivasi land and forested areas. To be sure, non-tribal groups that were to ultimately effect the dispossession of land were already living in the area. Since 1628 the tribal chieftain gradually granted service-grants (jagirs) of land to caste Hindu non-tribals that allowed outsiders to collect tax from adivasi inhabitants. But land alienation quickened following colonial ingress.

Prior to colonial entry the tribal chieftain (raja) only had nominal control over the adivasis who paid him nominal annual tribute through a Munda manki, a nominal head of a group of Munda tribal headmen of 10-12 villages in a loose confederation collective called the *parba*. The jagirs created a landlord class who disrupted existing traditional forms of *Bhainbari* and *Khuntkatti* land tenancy which customarily belonged to heirs of the original clearers of the agricultural lands i.e. founders of the villages who held customary ownership of 'the villages, all lands arable as well as

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<sup>28</sup> Places visited include Khunti, Murhu, Ulihatu, Marangada, and Soyko which lie off the Ranchi-Chaibasa road. Interviews were also conducted in villages in the proposed displacement area of the Karo region starting at Torpa on the Ranchi-Simdega route and proceeding upward to Tapkara, Derang and Loajimi. The region between Chainpur to Mahuadanr to the west of Ranchi in Gumla district is another area of Christian concentration consisting mostly of Oraons. In the Santhal Parganas, Dumka and its adjoining areas have a sizeable Christian presence.

waste, including forests and other resources belonging to them.' The Mundari Khuntkatti tenancy, for instance, was not assessable for rent, the tenant paid *chanda* (tribute) for the occupation of their territory while the Bhuihari tenures (held principally in Oraon areas) were held by the adivasi on perpetual fixed rents which were not customarily enhanced.<sup>29</sup> Surin points out that the Khuntkattidars and Bhuihardars were 'much superior classes of tenants than ordinary raiyats' as commonly presumed probably by caste Hindus who assumed control of jagirs. The landlords were likely to argue the raja controlled the land and had lawfully ceded it to them (Clarysse 1985: 96) although British officials attest that 'Hindu landlords and middlemen had always recognized the rights of the descendants of the original clearers of the villages to hold certain lands called bhuihari either rent free or at a quit rent.'<sup>30</sup>

The Permanent Settlement lent lethal legal ballast for the encroaching instincts of 'outsiders' built as it was around a presumption of zamindari ownership of land and emphasising proven record of ownership that was simply unavailable to (or needed for) the unlettered adivasis. The ability to tax the adivasis inevitably now assumed oppressive dimensions leading to cycles of debt, further land alienation and the introduction of *beth-begari* (forced labour). Landlords were known to demand 60-84 days of unpaid labour annually as opposed to the customary 14-15 days, adivasis were denied receipts for rent given, enabling them to demand rents two to three times over.<sup>31</sup> An oft-quoted passage from an 1869 article in the *Calcutta Review* eloquently captures the plight of the adivasis, who were known as the Kols:

When the oppressor wants a horse, the Kol must pay; when he desires a *palki* (palanquin), the Kols have to pay and afterwards to bear him therein. They must pay for his musicians, for his milch cows, for his paan [betel nut mixture]. Does some die in his house? He taxes them. Is a child born? Again a tax. Is there a marriage or Puja? A tax. Is the thikadar found guilty at *cutchary* [court] and sentenced to be punished? The Kol must pay the fine. Or does a death occur in the house of the Kol. The poor man must pay a fine. This plundering, punishing and robbing system goes on till the Kols run away.<sup>32</sup>

Lutheran missionaries arrived in 1845 after the effects of Kol insurrection of 1831, that was termed 'a gesture of despair' in a 'crude form of protest' against land alienation which saw the British take on more direct control of the area through the creation of South West Frontier Agency. Tribal dispossession continued apace that was to provide the principal context for conversion to Christianity. They gained their first converts only five years and rapidly attracted adivasi interest owing to the assistance the missionaries offered in resisting the landlords and offering legal help. A British official writes that 'work amongst aboriginals has always been a favourite field for missionary enterprise, and in Ranchi the conditions were exceptionally favourable. The population was backward, uncivilized, and illiterate; agrarian strife was rife, and

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29 For an extended treatment of the impact of colonial rule on adivasi land alienation and impact of Christian missionaries (passim), see Romila Thapar, and Majeed H. Siddiqi (1979), 'Chota Nagpur: The Precolonial and Colonial Situation', in UNESCO (ed.), *Trends in Ethnic Group Relations in Asia and Oceania*. Reprinted in (2003) in R. D. Munda and S. B. Mullick, *The Jharkhand Movement: Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Autonomy in India*, Chaibasa: Bindrai Institute for Research Study and Action, 31-72. PNS Surin, 'Status of Land among the tribal communities in Jharkhand', *Jharkhand Journal of Development and Management Studies*, Vol.1, November 2002, p. 59.

<sup>30</sup> J. Reid, *Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the District of Ranchi, 1902-1910* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1912), p. 34.

<sup>31</sup> L. Clarysse, S.J., *Father Constant Lievens*, S.J., (Ranchi: Satyabharati, 1985), p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> 'The Kols, the Insurrection of 1882 and the Land Tenure Act of 1869' Art. 1, *Calcutta Review*, Vol. 49, 1869, pp. 109-158, cited in Alexius Ekka, 'Hundred Years of the Christian Missions in Chotanagpur', *Indian Church History Review*, Vol. 33, 1999, p. 80.



spread of Christianity has gone hand in hand with the efforts of the aboriginals to resist the oppression of the landlords and to assert, and secure recognition for, their claims to the lands on which they were first settlers.<sup>33</sup>

German missionaries were presumed to be linked to colonial officials and conversion was deemed to be a perfunctory religious prelude to the recovery of lands. Thus the conversionary trajectory of adivasis in Chota Nagpur appears to have little in common with those in Northeast India where Christian cosmology attracted a section of converts even as mass conversions were taking place.<sup>34</sup> In Chota Nagpur conversion was a social exchange between evangelicals keen on filing flattering missionary reports and adivasis aspiring for the tenurial 'record of rights.' A GEL Mission report in 1869 sums it up:

It is a sad but very telling fact that the missionary on his district tours is not so much received because he has come to inquire into the spiritual condition of the people but because he is expected to assist them in regaining their land, and in freeing them from the oppression of the Thikadars. The shew (sic) generally speaking, no great desire to hear the word of God: 'give us our land; free us from the Thikadar; procure us release from our begar', such are the cries which meet the missionary everywhere, and he finds it very often extraordinarily difficult to convince the people that he is entirely unable to assist them in their difficulties.<sup>35</sup>

The 1911 Census quotes a Roman Catholic missionary regarding the 'inducements for conversion':

As a general rule religious motives are out of the question. They want protection against zamindari and police extortions and assistance in the endless litigation forced on them by zamindars. As a consequence – most of the converts came over (after panchayats) in whole villages or in groups of villages; a certain number of isolated families came over, either for help against zamindars or police extortion, or against the rest of their co-villagers who persecuted them because they were pointed out by the Sokhas as wizards or witches. Personally I know of some cases where individuals came over from religious motives. But these cases are rare.<sup>36</sup>

Hallett relates that 'enquirers no longer came by two or threes, but whole families, and in some cases whole villages, applied eagerly for baptism. On one day in November 1864 no less than six hundred men, women and children presented themselves.'<sup>37</sup> This pattern continued for at least 50 years. In 1890 there were 35,000 Christians in Chota Nagpur, which doubled in a decade by 1901. By 1913 there were 96,543 Christians, of which more than 73,000 were from Ranchi comprising of 37,000 Mundas, over 30,000 Oraons and over 6,000 Kharias.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> M. G. Hallett, 'Missions' *Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers: Ranchi* (Patna: Superintendent, Government Printing, Bihar and Orissa, 1917), p. 224.

<sup>34</sup> Richard M. Eaton (1984, "Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876-1971," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 11, no. 1, 1-43.

<sup>35</sup> J. C. Jerome, *The Chota Nagpore Mission: Its History and Present Position* (Calcutta: 1870), p.12 cited in Amit M. Ghose, *Christian Missions in Chotanagpur: A Study of Missionary Activities among the Mundas and Oraons of Ranchi 1845-1910*. M. Phil dissertation, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1990, p. 68.

<sup>36</sup> Census of India, 1911, Vol. 1, Part 1, p. 138.

<sup>37</sup> M. G. Hallett, 'Missions', *Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers: Ranchi* (Patna: Superintendent, Government Printing, Bihar and Orissa, 1917), p. 226.

<sup>38</sup> Hallett, op. cit., pp. 229-230. Alexius Ekka citing denominational sources arrives at different figures. "There were about 33,000 native Lutheran believers by 1886, 10,600 Anglicans by 1880 and 35,789 Catholics in Barway alone by 1891 in a span of two years of missionary work by Lievens, and a total Catholic population of 70,000 by 1890 in Chotanagpur.' Ekka, op. cit., p. 84.

Denominational location of Christians depended on the extent of help offered or rendered by the three main Churches namely, the Lutheran, the Roman Catholics and the Anglican SPG mission. Defections were reportedly 'rampant' between 1845-1910 owing to such considerations. During 1881-1891 nearly 1000 Anglicans switched to Roman Catholicism while Lutherans gained 4000 converts.<sup>39</sup> The SPG preferred to steer clear of the land question by virtue of its links with the Church of England establishment that effectively made it subject to official control. 'Consequently, they were numerically the smaller church in Chota Nagpur in the period between 1845-1910. There were 1901 converts for the Anglican Church as compared to 54000 for the Roman Catholics,<sup>40</sup> the latter principally through the legal advocacy and representation of the Belgian Jesuit Fr. Constant Lievens. Interestingly, Christianity did not make a dent among the Ho tribe living in adjoining Orissa which lived in a protected reservation and thus had a markedly less incidence of land alienation.

Contemporary Christians are under no illusion about the instrumental nature of accession of their forbearers to the Christian faith.<sup>41</sup> Manohar Munda, an 86 year old Khuntkattidar from Marangadha, recalls that six Munda Manki villages near his home converted to Christianity after a Catholic priest demanded conversion saying 'if you want to save your land convert'. The priest first helped them in settling the level of tax with the zamindars at Rs. 300 per annum. However, a disgruntled second wife of a khuntkattidar stole the money which provoked the zamindar to forcibly seize the lands. The priests then approached the authorities at Ranchi and elicited an agreement for a fresh survey of the region which dragged on for many years. But the adivasis remained Christians, with virtually no religious instructions, since they had 'given their word to the *padres*' (priests).<sup>42</sup>

The nature of Christian belief or the level of 'Christianisation' in Chota Nagpur is relevant to understand the political stance of its current adherents. The transmission of Christian belief among the first generation of adivasi converts was not uncommon to accounts of mass conversions among of the untouchable castes in Andhra and Tamil Nadu – in that they were mass conversions geared to achieve a pressing social objective and thus not grounded on perceived truth claims of the Christian faith. However adivasis thereon did not follow the trajectory of south Indian untouchable castes that appropriated a religious fervour which has not only continued since but governed the nature of political commitments of those south Indian Christians. As with other scholars before him Virginius Xaxa posits the organic view of caste society with the segmentary nature of tribal communities to explain why tribals suffer in comparison with dalits who have received affirmative action benefits. This may well be useful in explaining the different outcome of Christian conversion and engagement. The organic view of caste says that the dalits were subjected to inhuman treatment by virtue of being outcastes, but at least they were integral to the economy of the upper castes serving them in various capacities

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39 Ghose, op. cit., p. 90.

40 Imperial Gazetteer of India (Oxford: 1908), Vol. XXI, p. 204, cited in Ghose, op. cit., p. 73.

41 Oral transmission of memory seems particularly strong in Jharkhand, possibly due to the sequence of agrarian upsurges since the 19th century, from the 1831 Kol insurrection through to the 1900 Birsa revolt, that play a crucial role in framing contemporary adivasi identity. Having lived through a period of intense political ferment since the 19th century, characterised by loss of land, consistent struggles against the dikus, dealing with inadequate survey and settlement operations, the (occasionally) euphoric nature of the Jharkhand movement and facing the constant ingress of the postcolonial Indian state has conveyed a firm awareness of both local and regional history. Thus older adivasi activists are able to particularly recall the history of local land surveys in the 19th century and the Jharkhand movement of the Jaipal Singh era with relative ease.

42 Manohar Munda, interview, April 2005.

and interacting with them daily, despite their segregated inhabitation. In the course of time therefore ‘opportunities made available to the larger societies or the higher castes in the form of knowledge, information, technology, employment, etc, were also in sight for the scheduled castes, even though they were denied access to it.’ The tribes, by contrast, he says, live in self contained communities with restricted commerce and thus suffered the disadvantage of isolation.<sup>43</sup>

The isolation argument has now fallen into some disrepute to explain the absence of social change among tribals, but in the case of Chota Nagpur, one can argue at least that the cultural context to appropriate religious faith which existed in south India, in the face of an upper-caste intellectual revivalist backlash that contested the need for religious conversion, did not exist. Christian conversion in south India was also culturally destabilising in addition to unsettling power relations in tangible terms; in Chota Nagpur this wasn’t arguably so.<sup>44</sup> It remained for most part a trade off between recovery of land and entries in church registers even as a section of adivasis attained firmer religious grounding. This was particularly the case with the Mundas of southern Ranchi. The Oraons by comparison who had a different system of bhuinhari land tenure (that allowed individual families to own land) facilitated a greater appropriation of faith. Christian missions either helped them recover individual entitlement to land or education became a way to substitute for loss of land; both creating the context for a more structured transmission of faith for a section of the Oraon community that still continues. But this too was by no means pervasive even among the Oraons.

For the Mundas of southern Ranchi though, as for much of Chota Nagpur, institutional contact with Christianity impaired religious transmission. As a result in Chota Nagpur at large, Christianity did not replicate the mass evangelical revivals among Christians in south India since the 1950s that was to a significant extent sustained by Western evangelical interest and financial support.<sup>45</sup> Although this has to be empirically established, one can posit that the political context of Chota Nagpur hampered the transition to an individualist, quiescent faith that is a feature of a large section of south Indian Christianity. All of this hindered a Weberian momentum that might have created a larger self-absorbed middle class than what turned out through job reservations in public sector jobs since the 1950s. Christian belief and organisation in Chota Nagpur was not able to dislodge adivasi attachment to land, at least among the Mundas of Ranchi district, thus ensuring their intensive involvement in political movements.

## Christianity and the discourse of protest

Christianity however had a role in framing the discourse of adivasi protest. Colonial administrators constructed the category of ‘tribe’ to introduce distinctive regimes of governance in order to extract forestry and mineral resources in ‘frontier’ or ‘agency’ or reservation areas

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43 Virginius Xaxa, “Protective Discrimination: Why Scheduled Tribes lag behind Scheduled Castes,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 July 2001, from [www.epw.org.in](http://www.epw.org.in), accessed on 11 October 2001.

44 For instance, the processes of ‘cultural change’ wrought by the conversion of untouchable communities in south India such as Shanars, Pariahs and Pulayas, punctuated with debates over ‘sanskritisation’, vegetarianism, mostly in response to the urgent need to clarify Christian identity in the face of upper caste reaction, did not replicate itself in Chotanagpur. See Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India: The Church Missionary Society in South Travancore in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1989), pp. 202-203.

45 Lionel Caplan, “Popular Christianity in Urban South India,” *Religion and Society*, Vol. XXX, No. 2, 1983, pp. 28-44.

which later came in handy to keep out nationalist interest. Since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the elements of this ideology of tribal difference featured an ethnography of primitiveness, distinct social organisation, religious belief and economic behaviour. This much is well-attested. But the missionary role in disseminating an articulated ideology of difference on a popular plane among adivasis while attempting to secure their interests in land is less well-advertised.

There was, to be sure, a sharp pre-existent awareness of their rights that continually provoked agrarian upsurges. But the persistent stream of petitionary advocacy by missionaries, the mass contact with adivasis that that entailed coupled with the codification of tribal cultures by missionary anthropologists like J. B. Hoffmann – author of the multi-volume treatise *Encyclopaedia Mundarica*, and a much relied on consultant, if you will, for British administrators whilst preparing Land Survey settlements – played a crucial role in radiating the articulated ideology of difference and subordination among adivasis that was to be central to the political rhetoric of later Chota Nagpur politicians.<sup>46</sup> Missionaries thus had a significant say in the epistemic career of the ‘tribe’ that has been usefully deployed by adivasi politicians.

Apart from this ideological function, the missionaries were able to create an active associational life through institutional building. Notwithstanding the absence of religious fervour to begin with, Christian missions went about establishing an impressive network of schools and health facilities to consolidate linkages with their adherents.<sup>47</sup> The combination of Christian mainstream schools, vocational training centres and health facilities in urban and semi-urban areas undermined the sense of spatial isolation that rural adivasi communities experienced. The GEL Mission established cooperative credit banks. The Catholics were a lot more organised in this respect, with the creation of the Catholic Cooperative Credit Society by Fr. J. B. Hoffmann in 1909 with the purpose of encouraging thrift among tribal people. ‘It is a farmers’ Cooperative with as many Circles as the number of parishes in the old Ranchi Archdiocese, each parish having many rural units, often one unit per village... all tribal Catholic households of a village are entitled to become its members, who become joint guarantors when any one of them takes a loan from the Cooperative. Over the years it has protected the tribals from the nefarious activities of the moneylenders and has supported many a tribal youth in pursuing their higher studies, besides offering credit to the farmers on comfortable terms.’<sup>48</sup> Informants relate that it is very common for parishes to conduct a bank meeting soon after the Catholic Mass is solemnised each Sunday. Of course authority over the Credit Society gives Roman Catholic priests a great

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<sup>46</sup> See Peter Tete, *A Missionary Social Worker in India: Fr. J. B. Hoffman, the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act and the Catholic Cooperatives 1893-1928* (Rome: Universita Gregorina Editrice, 1984).

<sup>47</sup> The first school, Bethesda Girls School, Ranchi, was started in 1851 followed by St. Paul’s Boys School and St. Margaret Girls School, Ranchi in 1869. The other prominent institutions include St. John’s Boys School, Ranchi in 1887, St. Columba’s College, Hazaribagh in 1899, and Ursuline Girls School, Ranchi in 1903. Girls education was a specific area of interest for the missionaries. There were two vocational schools for lace work in Ranchi and Khunti besides formal educational centers opened at Tongon (1907) and Rengarh (1909) in addition to various primary and middle schools in both English and vernacular medium. The other schools of note for Ekka include St. Margaret Women’s Training School Ranchi (Catholic; 1909), SPG Teachers Training School (for men; 1904), Bethsaida Women’s Training School Ranchi (Lutheran; 1948), Ursuline Convent Girls Training School Lohardaga (1914), Teachers’ Training School Noatoli (1912), Teachers Training Institute Sitagarha Hazaribagh (1950). Protestant groups took the lead in establishing health facilities. The Dublin University Mission started the St. Columba’s Hospital, Hazaribagh; the SPG established hospitals in Ranchi, Murhu and Itki; the Methodist Mission and the CMS opened hospitals in Pakur (1926) and Hiranpur (1929) while the Catholics opened their first hospital in Mandar in 1947. The SPG also opened Leprosy Hospitals in Purulia and Lohardugga. See Ekka, pp. 85-87.

<sup>48</sup> By 1998, the Cooperative had 62,268 members, handing out a total credit of £147,123 with total assets amounting to £1,733,920. Ekka, p. 89.

deal of control over congregational affairs, but historically initiatives like this arguably forged a more structured associational life than the episodic *ulghans* (uprisings) that were a feature of adivasi resistance and enabled the tribals to acclimatise to urban locales that would become crucial as the heyday of nationalist politics approached.

Amit Ghose summarises the role of mission succinctly:

Missionaries functioned according to a well-chalked out programme in the tribal areas of CNP. They produced an ideology for the peasant system emerging in the tribal region and grafted the notion of private property in land to the communal mode of production; articulated the demands of tribals as peasant proprietors for the restoration of land, regulation of rent, and abolition of feudal dues; guided peasant struggles against Zamindars of CNP; worked for the passage of agrarian law and set up peasant organisations like cooperative credit societies. In fact, they gave a new sense of self-respect to the tribal peasants and sought to create a separate identity for them.<sup>49</sup>

Importantly, for the purpose of the future Christian mission thus offered (literally) a useful institutional canopy over an area seething with adivasi discontent and helped usher in the associational density that was a feature of adivasi mobilisation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its student hostels became sites for political mobilisation and soon numerous associations were formed to raise funds for educating adivasis and fight diku oppression like the Christian Association in 1898 by Lutheran graduates, Christian Students Organisation in 1912, Chota Nagpur Charitable Association in 1912, Chota Nagpur Unnati Samaj in 1915. These were mostly the initiatives of Lutheran and Anglican youth leaders and were followed by the Catholics who formed the Catholic Sabha in 1935.

Vidyarthi and Sahay trace the rise of the Jharkhand movement to the efforts of J. Bartholomen, 'a young orphan' from Chaibasa who was raised by the Anglican missionaries. Moved by a sense of duty to fellow tribals and inspired by the example of Dacca Students Union whose conferences he attended, Bartholomen started mobilising educated youth and organised successful fund raising events involved Anglican and Lutheran congregations in Ranchi. He eventually started a branch of the Dacca Students Union in Ranchi under the 'supervision' of Peter Hayward.<sup>50</sup> This students' organisation emerged in 1916 as the Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj (trans. Improvement Society), whose members were 'mostly Christian tribals' from the Lutheran and Anglican congregations. It was led Joel Lakra and its active members included Theble Oraon, Bandi Oraon, Paul Dayal etc. (Vidyarthi and Sahay 1978: 86-87). The aim of the Unnati Samaj (CNUS) was to 'uplift Chotanagpur from the present backward state' and 'to improve the social, political and economic conditions of the tribals.'

The CNUS' prominence in adivasi mobilization was acknowledged when the Simon Commission held consultations with its leadership in 1928. Till it was merged into the Adivasi Mahasabha in 1938, the 'Unnati Samaj embodied an interdenominational unity of the Missions for political purposes. It was led by tribal teachers and catechists and sought to secure employment for educated tribals, reservation in the services and legislative bodies' (Ekka 1999:

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<sup>49</sup> Amit Ghose, *Christian Missions in Chotanagpur: A Study of Missionary Activities among the Mundas and Oraons of Ranchi 1845-1910*, M. Phil dissertation, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1990, p.97.

<sup>50</sup> Vidyarthi and Sahay do not elaborate on Bartholomen's future; he is simply said to have been active in the movement for a while, 'but just when his efforts were about to blossom, he was thrown out of the scene.' See L. P. Vidyarthi, and K. N. Sahay (1978), *The Dynamics of Tribal Leadership in Bihar*, Allahabad: Kitab Mahal, pp. 85-86.



92). It was through the unifying efforts of Ignace Beck<sup>51</sup>, a Catholic politician, that all these associations merged to become the Adibasi Mahasabha – which was to start the movement for a separate state for tribals through its later *avatar*, the Jharkhand Party, in opposition to the Congress whose politicians like Rajendra Prasad were unsympathetic to the tribals. Attracting enormous support among the adivasis, the Jharkhand Party, under the leadership of the popular Jaipal Singh, became the leading opposition party in the first post independent Bihar Legislature in 1952 and repeated its success in 1957 and gradually went into decline after merging with the Congress in 1963.

Anglican missionary correspondence reflects the importance of Christian politicians in initiating the autonomy movement. The then Bishop of Chotanagpur writing to the Missionary Council in 1940 reports:

We have indeed been confronted with a novel situation this year, owing to the fact that the aboriginals have organized themselves into a political association – the adibasi sabha – and have thereby come into conflict with the supporters of the congress party. This has not been altogether favourable to the work of the evangelization as zeal for the spread of the gospel has tended to be swamped by a flood of political feeling. Christians have played a leading part in the movement, as there is a much higher level of education among them than among non-Christian aboriginal and the Congress government, always sensitive to opposition, has retaliated by various acts of discrimination against Christians.<sup>52</sup>

A Diocesan report nine years later says:

Many of the leaders are drawn from the ranks of the Christians, but those who attained most prominence among them are distinguished rather for a certain demagogic capacity rather than for the consistency of their Christian example. It is perhaps inevitable that the Christian elements among the aboriginals should be politically more vocal than their non-Christian neighbours as owing to the higher percentage of literates among them they are a good deal less backward than the latter.<sup>53</sup>

Evidently even the nationalist Congress viewed the movement as Christian and Church-led. The diocesan report cautions the mission against alluding to the political situation in Chota Nagpur:

If you should allude to the political situation here, please be most careful to say anything derogatory to the Congress government, as they are very resentful of criticism: all three missions, Roman, Anglican and Lutheran have officially pursued a policy of strict neutrality, insisting on

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<sup>51</sup> Beck became an MP in the 1935 elections and was quickly disillusioned by Congress seriousness about tribal issues and expressed an attraction toward 'ethnic separatism' of Jinnah and attempted to unify all Christians under one platform. He faced opposition from his own Catholic Sabha's priests and laymen but managed to get other leaders on board for a unified front for elections to the Ranchi Municipal elections which Beck's alliance won resoundingly. Beck's alliance called for the separate state for Chotanagpur under the rubric of Chotanagpur Adibasi Mahasabha. ('no future for adivasis so long as they are ruled by non-tribals.'). See Vidyarthi and Sahay, p. 89.

<sup>52</sup> George Noel Lankester Hall, Bishop of Chotanagpur, to Canon John McLeod Campbell, General Secretary of the Missionary Council of the Church Assembly. Dated 2 February 1940, Diocesan Reports 1937-52, MSS 3127 115 at Lambeth Palace Library (LPL), London

<sup>53</sup> Diocesan Report, letter to Canon John McLeod Campbell, 29 May 1949, MSS 3127, 143-144.

the supernatural mission of the church and its superiority to all racial prejudices. We have continued to cooperate with the Congress campaigns for the promotion of the spread of literacy and temperances.<sup>54</sup>

The report also says that in September 1947 ‘the heads of the three churches –Roman Catholic, Lutherans and Anglican – were served with a peremptory order to abstain from meddling in politics and the missionaries were publicly accused of fomenting the agitation both on the platform and in the newspapers controlled by the Congress Party.’<sup>55</sup> (This is not to suggest that Christians were solely responsible in the agitation for securing adivasi rights, but to merely say that organised Christianity provided the institutional impetus for educated Christians to emerge and build on an established tradition of protest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.)

Christian politicians subsequently, however, lost appeal for a variety of reasons: They were predominantly drawn from urban educated classes and did not have an agrarian agenda that were assuming greater urgency, particularly in the Santal Parganas, as more and more land was being taken up for development projects with appalling rehabilitation packages that led to the rise of the Shibu Soren’s JMM. There were other structural factors at play as Stuart Corbridge has pointed out. Adivasi communities were internally differentiated on class lines and ethnoregionalism had to come to terms with the fact that the adivasis were in fact a minority and thereby had to co-opt non-tribals into the movement that affected its prospects.

### **Political outlook of mainline churches, Jesuits and ‘ordinary Christians’**

The ‘mainline’ churches represented by Lutherans, Anglicans and Catholics, meanwhile, had varying political instincts towards the movement for statehood, while pursuing staple initiatives in the spheres of education, health, culture and economy. This has partly to do with the organizational character and the political status of religious authorities. On a broad plane, Catholics distinguished themselves since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century in campaigning for land rights and educating adivasis. The Anglicans, initially a breakaway group of the Lutherans, with close links to the colonial regime, restricted themselves to educational and health related efforts, the translation of scriptures etc. and refrained from political involvement. The Lutherans were a lot more politically active. They had a significant following among the Mundas of Ranchi district and sported a looser organisational structure since World War I when the German missionaries had to return home, thus fast-tracking the leadership handover to local adivasis. The prominence of Munda politicians in Chota Nagpur allowed them to hold sway over the political outlook of the Lutheran Church; in fact politicians like NE Horo held a prominent layman’s post in the GEL hierarchy for years.<sup>56</sup>

The Catholic leadership was nowhere as politically robust in the pre-independence phase as the GEL in endorsing the laity’s political interests. The top down character of Catholic hierarchy plus the fact that the leadership was predominantly Belgian in a British colony led to a restrained political stance preventing them from actively endorsing the activism of its adherents. In his memoirs, the Catholic politician Ignace Beck notes that the both GEL mission and the Anglican

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<sup>54</sup> Hall to McLeod, op. cit., MSS 3127, 115.

<sup>55</sup> Diocesan Report, op. cit., MSS 3127, 143-144.

<sup>56</sup> Horo’s residence in Ranchi, behind GEL College, is one reportedly accorded to him by virtue of being a ‘secretary’ of the GEL Church.

Church did not prevent the laity from being part of political associations like the Unnati Samaj but 'any Catholic enrolling himself as a member or occupying an Executive post in the Samaj was ostracized'.<sup>57</sup> But eventually, to counteract the appeal of the Unnati Samaj and enlist the support of Catholic laymen who were discreetly joining the CNUS, the Catholic Church started the Chotanagpur Catholic Sabha in 1932-33. It had a non-political charter but it strove to 'tender advice to Government on matters relating to adivasis' interests.<sup>58</sup> As devolutionary politics kicked in the Catholic Church's political drives were mostly emulative in character, keen on preserving a Catholic niche in self-governing arrangements. After independence, the Catholic Church leaned toward the Congress rather than openly favour the pro-Jharkhand parties.

The Catholic establishment has since expressed greater interest in politics. The current Cardinal Telesphore Toppo is known for his anti-Hindu nationalist posturing and criticism of governmental 'interference' in religious affairs. There are a number of Catholic organisations which are associated with social causes. At least one Catholic priest went so far as to contest contesting the 2005 legislative assembly election and was suspended by the Bishop.<sup>59</sup>

However, interlocutors draw a distinction between rhetorical posturing of urban-based religious leadership and the cautious approach of clergy in the countryside. The hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church also works against open participation in causes led by non-observant laity or sarna activists. Parish priests are used to a fair degree of control over congregations, by virtue of institutional authority over schools, hospital and the local chapters of the cooperative credit society, making them unlikely to join in struggles they cannot lead or control. This is particularly the case with junior and middle ranking priests with local adivasi roots who presume to be or are perceived as alternative power centre for social movements, leading to a fitful relationship with popular struggles.<sup>60</sup>

The Jesuits, however, are different. They provide key low-radar support to many people's movements through informal advice, drawing attention of community leaders to legal matters, gazette notifications, policy documents etc, raising awareness by conducting meetings in villages, coordinating the work of activists in different areas, printing and disseminating primers on specific issues in the vernacular for eliciting popular support and so on. What lends them trans-Christian appeal in Jharkhand is the distance they maintain from the Catholic establishment, literally and substantively. Jesuits assigned to work in justice-related issues do not live in Catholic enclaves and often take up causes that are at variance with the conserving instincts of the clergy.

Also certain sections of Indian Jesuits have a noticeable attraction for Marxism and wish to translate social analysis into mobilizational energy. In fact Jesuit activism across India pointedly avoids deploying religious idioms for fear of alienating non-Christian audiences. This has been a feature of prominent Jesuits involved in social action, particularly those involved with the Indian

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<sup>57</sup> Ignace Beck, *Political Awakening of Tribals in Jharkhand: A Historical Perspective*, New Delhi: Sinagi Dei Publications, 2002, p.8.

<sup>58</sup> They included activities such as '(1) Advice given to government when Excluded and Partially Excluded Areas were formed in Jharkhand, (2) Memorandum to the States Reorganisation Commission demanding a separate Jharkhand State, (3) Memorandum presented to the Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes Commission.' *ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> 'Catholic priest in the fray', *The Tribune*, 11 February 2005 and 'Jharkhand Bishop suspends priest for contesting election', at <http://www.catholiccambodia.org/en/read/179>, posted 14 February 2005.

<sup>60</sup> Interviews with activists, Ranchi, April 2005.



Social Institute (ISI), New Delhi. The writings of recent directors of the institute like Fr. Stan Lourdasamy, Fr. Walter Fernandes, Fr. Ambrose Pinto, and Fr. Prakash Louis reflect an affinity to Marxian categories, to the virtual exclusion of religious idiom in their writing or activism.<sup>61</sup> Such a secularised orientation plus an acutely relativistic view of Indian cultural practices has enabled Jesuits to forge strong bonds with non-Christian civil society all over India. In Jharkhand, Jesuits like the late Fr. Mathew Areeparampil who worked in West Singhbhum are well-known social activists. They have forged successful links with other activists and village communities partly due to the resources they offer and irreligious baggage they come with. In fact, they are known to refuse requests by observant adivasis to pray publicly when on campaign visits, stating clearly that they come as social workers not as religious functionaries.<sup>62</sup> That a few prominent Jesuits are not from Jharkhand affords them a manoeuvrability that local priests might not have. Their functional agnosticism is useful in mediating cultural tensions that may arise between Christian and sarna activists as will be discussed later. One important initiative that the Jesuits facilitate is the Jharkhand Justice Forum, composed of 30 activists featuring six retired judges of the High Court, 12 lawyers working at either the High Court or district courts, and other prominent social activists. They provide free legal representation for adivasis waging court battles to recover land or seeking compensation for displacement etc. They are particularly active in raising awareness about the powers of the gram sabha as instituted by the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act 1996, as will be reviewed below.<sup>63</sup>

One caveat at this stage is perhaps in order. Notwithstanding the density of Christian associations in Jharkhand and the (uneven) involvement of mainline Churches in politics, the latter have *not* managed to forge a united Christian vote owing to poor electoral coordination between the three denominations. An All Churches Coordination Committee was formed in December 1998 ostensibly to forge unity in the face of Hindu nationalist assertion. Composed of all denominations, its desired objectives are to promote communal harmony and foster unity between Christian and sarna adivasis. But it is yet to translate into effective tactical voting owing partly to confused proclamations by Church authorities. In the 2004 parliamentary Lok Sabha elections, there was reportedly a clear statement from Church authorities to favour 'secular parties' and consequently Christians voted for the Congress-JMM coalition which helped the combine to do well. In the 2005 Assembly, however, Church leaders apparently equivocated urging voters to vote with their conscience, thereby adding to the muddle of a severely differentiated tribal voting pattern caused by disastrous seat adjustments within the Congress-JMM alliance. In fact, Jesuit social activists and village level Christian leaders discourage such coordination since electoral contests have divisive effects within communities that have a bearing on pervasive adivasi mobilisation.<sup>64</sup>

Getting back to social movement activism, Christians are part of important groups like Jharkhand Organisation for Human Rights (JOHAR), which originated in Chaibasa as a loose grouping of activists dealing with advocacy, training and mobilising on land and displacement issues. It brings out a monthly newsletter called *Johar Sakham* (Johar Leaf) that documents human rights violations. It is popular among young activists. In the mid 1980s, the Delhi unit of Johar, composed of students from Delhi University, fought for the rights of adivasi women

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<sup>61</sup> There is no title of religious interest in the list of publications released by the Indian Social Institute at [www.isidelhi.org.in/publication/books.htm](http://www.isidelhi.org.in/publication/books.htm). Worth noting that Fr. Pinto has co-authored a book (with Somen Chakraborty) titled *Relevance of Communist Manifesto* (New Delhi: ISI, 2000).

<sup>62</sup> Interviews with activists, Ranchi, April 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Culled from interviews with activists.

<sup>64</sup> Impressions of interviewed activists, New Delhi and Ranchi.

working as domestic helps in Delhi, who were prone to oppressive working conditions, sexual harassment and erratic salary payments. These students used to meet aggrieved groups of working women in public parks on Sunday mornings listening and taking action on grievances and imparting information on worker rights etc. This was a particularly successful endeavour as the Catholic Church soon took responsibility for this group, forming the Delhi Domestic Working Women's Forum (DDWWF).<sup>65</sup>

Groups like JOHAR or Akhra, that produces documentaries on people's movements, bring together a variety of student and women leaders who were typically politicised when studying in colleges in Palamau, Hazaribagh and Ranchi during the early 1990s. The more experienced and educated activists come from middle class backgrounds that are able to forge links with established national level activist circuits in Delhi. But the core of activists in Jharkhand tend to be from lower middle class or poorer background with access to education that politicises them without endowing the necessary 'social capital' that middle class Christians have in order to procure jobs reserved for Scheduled Tribes. They also do not have the resources to start independent organisations in places like Ranchi and thus eke a living by multitasking marginal jobs in NGOs, running small businesses like shops, roadside restaurants or typing institutes. In Ranchi, for instance, there are at least 25-30 activists in the age group 23-40, most of whom are reportedly Christian, who make a living by filing daily stories to Hindi papers like *Prabhat Khabar*, *Hindustan* etc which accept their reportage but reportedly pay no more than Rs. 50 or Rs. 100 per story (as on September 2004). Their writing focuses on everyday stories of adivasi exploitation, instances of police brutality, reports of burgeoning struggles against development projects etc. But it is an uncertain existence, as they do not have the requisite protection that mainstream journalists have especially in confrontations with the police etc and as noted the remuneration is inadequate to make ends meet. This is the flip side of spontaneous, informal, unregistered associational life in Jharkhand; activists pay a severe price for refusing to be drawn into the state regulated civil society for either fear of losing their political flexibility or by their inability to establish formal NGOs owing to limited social capital or economic resource.

Owing to their roots in villages<sup>66</sup>, their extensive contacts in the activist subculture built up over years of crisscrossing the region while lending their organisational skills to little known struggles, these activists have been able to sustain links with rural areas in a way that Christian politicians of the Jharkhand Party could not in the past, by consistently focusing on agrarian struggles.

Reared in a discourse of oppression and subordination that point to inimical designs of the state and dikus on their land, the prevalence of adivasis being cheated in marketplaces while selling or buying products, their being subject to abject working conditions in mines and construction activity etc, the activists have a deep antipathy toward the state and commercial activities of the dikus. The experience of development projects that caused large-scale loss of land makes them perennially suspicious of state policy and actors. It is common for them to hear them say '*sarkar tho chor hai*' or even '*hum to sarkar shaitan maan the hai*' ('The government is a thief' or 'we believe the government is the devil'). Activists are well aware that extending state activity in the region entails further loss of land in the region. There is a sharpened awareness of losing further land in

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<sup>65</sup> Indian Social Institute, *The Tribal Domestic Worker at the Crossroads: A report on the Status of Tribal Delhi Domestic Working Women* (Delhi: 1993).

<sup>66</sup> In Ranchi district, 92.49 percent of Mundari speakers lived in rural areas as compared to 74.69 percent of Kurukh/Oraon speakers and 95.10 percent of Santals. In Gumla district, 98.60 of kurukhs reside in rural areas. (Census of India 1991: Bihar State District Profile 1991, p. 185.)

the Mundari Khuntkatti areas of Khunti, which has been provoked partly by the adverse effects in neighbouring areas like Hatia and the Koel Karo project to the east towards Torpa. This is an area of Christian concentration and activists are opposed to suggestions that Khunti subdivision be upgraded into a separate district. As Kalyan Munda of the Munda Development Action Committee says: 'A new district will give the government an excuse to build a new subdivisional and block offices, courts and community halls. There will be village schools, health centres; plans for *angan wadi* schools are already in place. These are all pretexts for taking over land. Many more dikus will come into the district as a result. Land will be taken over for these facilities but the adivasis themselves will have no access to them. We have also seen the kind of displacement that happened because of the Heavy Engineering Corporation in Hatia. Roads will be constructed against our will and then they introduce a road tax!'<sup>67</sup>

Along with some sarna activists, these Christian activists also share a disdain for establishment Christianity for having failed to support the agitations openly, for preaching an individualist prosperity gospel that creates a self-absorbed middle class and for the Church's cultural stances that alienates Christians from sarna adivasis. While maintaining contact with Church congregants, their activism is borne out of a functional relativism that sustains meaningful links with sarnas and privileges adivasi elements in the construction of self-identity to foster communal harmony. For instance, in the annual event to mark UN Indigenous Peoples Day on 9<sup>th</sup> August, activists have consciously chosen to keep religious elements out of ceremonies. To be sure, power dynamics, petty jealousies expressed as rumours of profiteering by those heading NGOs exist but that has not led to the kind of intense divisions that can jeopardise their ability to coordinate mass action. There is a notional shorthand as to who the reliable activists are – regardless of organisational fealty – which helps in supporting each other's activities, attending each other's programmes and the like.

### Impact of Christian social activism

An important area of collaboration between sarnas, independent Christian activists and Jesuits is the drive towards securing tribal self-rule. This is done principally by raising awareness about the powers of the Gram Sabha (village assembly) as instituted through the Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996. This Act is intended to devolve financial and administrative powers to the village level as per customary law and practices. Importantly, the PESA Act says the Gram Sabhas shall be consulted before the acquisition of land for development projects that include mining leases. Through printed literature in the vernacular and village level consultations, these activists also disseminate the implications of the 1997 Samata judgment of the Supreme Court which ruled that the state had no right to grant leases – even on government owned forest land – to private companies on areas governed by the Fifth Schedule and that only cooperative societies solely run by Scheduled Tribes could mine in such areas.<sup>68</sup> I came across one NGO in the Khunti subdivision which has been organizing meetings of clan leaders in particular areas with plans to extend to regional conclaves to take advantage of Gram Sabha provisions and revive the Munda manki system of governance.

One effect of this grassroots momentum has been that the Jharkhand government has not able to conduct panchayat elections even though it passed the state panchayati raj act in 2001. Civil

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<sup>67</sup> Interview with Kalyan Munda, Ranchi, March 2005.

<sup>68</sup> See Asha Krishnakumar, 'The 'Samata' Judgment,' *Frontline*, Vol. 21, Issue 19, 11-24 September 2004.

society actors are opposed to conducting panchayat elections, preferring to confer legal recognition to existing customary village sabhas that reputedly have a more consultative decision-making process than voting procedures. Elected panchayats, they reckon, create a rival power structure in villages which state level politicians could manipulate to coopt or rupture the existing consensus (although some would see this as a ruse by existing adivasi elites to retain control). The state government continues its efforts to counter this grassroots coalition. In November 2005, the Arjun Munda Government passed a Cabinet resolution which de-reserved the post of Mukhiya (headmen) in panchayat segments that have less than 40 per cent of Scheduled Tribes.<sup>69</sup> This is arguably in violation of the Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act 1996 which decreed that all post of gram panchayat mukhias in Scheduled Areas will be reserved for the Scheduled Tribes.<sup>70</sup> The state government is simply attempting to create an alternative demand for quotas from non-adivasi sections. The government estimably hopes to create a local demand for panchayat elections in scheduled areas by disbursing money to neighbouring panchayats.

The activists are also geared to resist the state government in the field of tourism. In response to the 2002 State Industrial Policy which said 'Priority shall be accorded to develop eco-tourism, religious tourism, heritage- tourism, adventure tourism, amusement parks, resorts and way side amenities,' a group of 14 organisations came together to form the Jharkhand Tourism Coordination Committee and frame an alternative tourist policy which demands adivasi control and ownership over such projects should be they implemented.<sup>71</sup> A document titled 'Jharkhand Peoples Tourism Policy' assails proposed plans for elitist bias attempting only to cater to tourist industry and the visitor while leaving out adivasis and dalits who happen to be owners of the lands under consideration for the expansion of tourist infrastructure. The state government should thus undertake to 'protect the ownership, control and profit rights of these Scheduled communities'.<sup>72</sup>

The collaboration of sarna and Christian activists is evident, for instance, in the legal practice of Ratnaker Bhengra, a young Munda Christian lawyer, who is said to be the first adivasi with his own chamber at the Ranchi High Court (which he is now sharing with a Jesuit Oraon lawyer). An observant Anglican, Bhengra pursued a Law degree in Delhi University, going on to an M.Phil in international law from Jawaharlal Nehru University and returned to Jharkhand to work for adivasi rights, eschewing the expected route of seeking a job in the administrative services that fellow middle class Christians tend to do. He was associated with JOHAR in Delhi and makes a living as a lawyer while devoting time for public interest litigations addressing adivasi interests. His background in international law has come in handy, enabling him to be part of the UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples that came out with a draft declaration in 1993. He is also a member of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous People, a body with ECOSOC status under the UN Commission on Human Rights. Owing to the types of cases that he has fought

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<sup>69</sup> 'Govt. to amend Panchayati Raj Act, *The Hindu*, 4 November 2004.

<sup>70</sup> Stan Swamy, 'Tussle for reservation quota: Adivasi identity is based not on numbers but on ethnicity', *The Telegraph*, 27 July 2005.

<sup>71</sup> In its 2004 memorandum to the 12<sup>th</sup> Finance Commission, the government sought Rs. 185 crore from the Centre to develop tourist spots across the state. Tourist areas envisaged for development include Maithon Dam area, Netarhat, Chandil lake and Udhwa bird sanctuary. Government of Jharkhand, Memorandum to the Twelfth Finance Commission, July 2004.

<sup>72</sup> 'Jharkhand Peoples Tourism Policy' (undated: Ranchi), published by Jharkhand Tourism Coordination Committee. The booklet features details of the 'tourism network' of activist leaders who are assigned to coordinate protests for 21 separate tourist destinations.

along with non-Christian activists and his international involvement, Bhengra is regarded highly among non-Christian adivasis in both rural and urban settings.

The public interest litigation, delineated below, that he has been involved in league with other adivasi lawyers has not met with much success, as the courts have rejected their pleas, but they can be understood as important elements in the struggle to secure adivasi rights and autonomy in the relatively new state.

The *Shanti Khalkho v. the State of Bihar* case<sup>73</sup> dealt with a petition seeking a directive from the High Court that the recruitment guidelines for primary school teachers laid down by the Education Department of the Government of Bihar concerning the use of mother tongue are strictly adhered to, particularly in Scheduled Areas. The Education Department ruled in 1953 that 'throughout the primary and middle school stages, that is the first eight years, the medium of instruction shall be the mother tongue.'<sup>74</sup> In Bihar it also recognised the adivasi languages of Santhali, Oraon, Ho, Mundari in addition to Hindi, Bengali, Oriya, Urdu, Maithili & English. The petition, evidently operating on the assumption that non-adivasis were getting recruited over the decades as qualified teachers to teach in adivasi languages, asked the court that adequate testing of bilingual ability be mandatory for applicants for primary school teachers. The Court took notice of the State of Bihar's counter-affidavit which claimed the guidelines were being followed and ruled that 'no further directions were warranted' with the anodyne remark that 'the Jharkhand Public Service Commission is expected to perform its duties properly, being a constitutional body.'<sup>75</sup>

The *Paklu Pahan v. the State of Bihar* was another public interest case filed in the High Court by a Mundari priest asking the Court to issue a restraining order on the construction of a medium-irrigation project called the Surangai Reservoir Scheme. At the time of the petition, the government had already acquired the land under the Land Acquisition Act, as it was to submerge 24 Mundari Khuntkatti villages in the Tamar circle of Ranchi district. It had issued the notification, paid compensation, assigned plots of land to rehabilitate the displaced families and, in the words, provided 'every fundamental facilities like road, temple, tube-well, well, tank, community centre, community lavatory, children's park, electrification, drainage, construction of culverts etc.'<sup>76</sup> The petition argued that the Land Acquisition Act used to procure land for the reservoir scheme infringed the fundamental right to belief as enshrined in Article 25 of the Constitution and Sections 50 (7), 240 and 241 of the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1988<sup>77</sup> by submerging 'hadgiris', where the bones of Mundari Khuntkatti ancestors were buried; sarnas, the sacred groves, where Munda deities are 'permanently seated' and other sites 'inseparably woven with Mundari religious beliefs. The High Court dismissed the application cited two previous cases where Land Acquisition Act was in conflict with religious beliefs.

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<sup>73</sup> CWJC No. 1490 (98R) in the High Court of Judicature at Patna Ranchi Bench, Ranchi. For the Petitioner: M/s. R. Bhengra and H.K. Mahato

<sup>74</sup> As recorded in page 35 of Government of Bihar Education Dept., Res. No. 645 ER of Ranchi dated 13 August 1953.

<sup>75</sup> Ruling by Justice Tapan Sen in Civil Writ Jurisdiction Case No. 1490 of 1998 [R].

<sup>76</sup> Ruling by Justices A. Alams and N. N. Singh, CWJC No. 2349 of 1996 [R].

<sup>77</sup> Section 50 (7) of the CNT Act reads: Nothing herein contained shall enable the Deputy Commissioner to authorise the acquisition of any part of a holding whereon a temple, mosque or other place of worship, sacred grove, burial or burning ground exists. Section 240-242 deal with 'restriction on transfer of Mundari Khunt-Kattidari tenancies. *Handbook of Chotanagpur Tenancy Laws* (Allahabad: Rajpal and Company, 2002), p. 47 & pp. 135-137.



Bhengra is also involved in attempts to secure a separate identity for sarna religion even if many adivasis incorporate elements of Hindu Vaishnavite religion into their religious practice. This is to prevent the dissolution of sarna adivasi identity in the face of active Hinduising efforts by groups such as the RSS and the BJP.

For instance, there is an ongoing public interest case concerning the construction of an electric crematorium for Hindus authorised to be built by the district administration at Aanchal in Ranchi district. The proposed crematorium will be on a plot that has been used as a burial ground called *masna* or *bargari*, by Oraons for over 100 years. The petitioners argued that tribal belief warrants that 'their respectable dead are buried only at their burial places, and if someone dies at a far away place then at least a piece of his bone is to be buried in that graveyard' and that the proposed crematorium would deprive those professing the sarna faith of their masna 'for all times to come.'<sup>78</sup> The petition also points to the alleged insensitive and impractical handling of the situation by the district administration has created bad blood between the people following the Sarna faith and the Hindus. It is backed by supplementary affidavits from priests of the local sarna samiti (informal groups of sarna activists) attesting that the ground was used as a masna. The court is currently considering this public interest case.

Activists have also sought to secure a minority religion status for the sarna religion as the 2001 Census operations were underway. An interesting petition on behalf of Rejan Guria in 2001 made two pertinent pleas. One that Census operations that were conducted in February be redone in July-August and that 'Sarna' column be included as a religion as it deprives them of minority status that would help access development schemes and benefits.<sup>79</sup> It questions the decision of the Registrar General (Census) to conduct the census operations in February when a significant portion of Scheduled Tribes 'are compelled to seasonally migrate' in 'exercise of their right to life and livelihood.' Since the times and locations to which the Scheduled Tribes has varied in the intervening ten years since the previous census, the petition reckons that the adivasis should be enumerated in their permanent domicile / ancestral homes as that is the only lasting connection they have while pursuing a partly itinerant mode of work. To that end, the petition prefers the July-August period as a preferable time for conducting census operations, as most Scheduled Tribes will have returned to their homes.

In the course of claiming a separate column for the 'sarna' religion that could be called 'Adi Dharm', the petition points to the absence of the same even though the majority of adivasis are known to practice the sarna faith. The petition appends reports of opposition to the census operation as a result of the absence of the 'sarna' column in East and West Singhbhum. It highlights certain gaffes in the 1991 Census that shed light on the authenticity of its findings relating to Scheduled Tribes. For instance, it account for 163 individuals as belonging to the Johar faith. Johar happens to be a mode of adivasi greeting and cannot be reckoned as a belief system. The 1991 Census also delineates 18 religions under the category of 'Other religions and persuasions' that together have 1,442,766 adherents out of a total of 6,616,914 Scheduled Tribes in Bihar.<sup>80</sup> Deducting 1.4 million tribals of 'other religions' from a total 6.6 million Scheduled

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<sup>78</sup> Dhananjay Kumar Dubey v. State of Jharkhand, In the High Court of Jharkhand at Ranchi, Civil Writ Jurisdiction WP (PIL) No. 6348 of 2003.

<sup>79</sup> Rejan Guria v. Union of India & others, W.P. (PIL) No. 3204 of 2001, in the High Court of Jharkhand at Ranchi.

<sup>80</sup> The petition appears to have some factual errors. The figure for 'other religions and persuasions' is 1,443,258, Census of India 1991, Series 1, Paper 1 of 1995, Religion, p. 18. The tribal religions mentioned are Bhumij, Gond, Ho, Johar, Kharwar, Manab Dharma, Mikir, Munda, Oraon, Paharia, Sadri, Santal, Sari Dharma, Sauriya, Sing

Tribes, the petition questions why 21 percent of adivasis have been unaccounted for in terms of religion. Further it asks the court to clarify if the religion called 'Swarna' in the 1991 Census that has 1,417,427 adherents is in fact a spelling mistake for 'Sarna' religion. This is important as 'Swarna' might be confused colloquially with 'swarna log' that refers to caste Hindus.

The court is urged to include a column and a code for 'sarna' religion to be called 'Adi Dharm' on the assumption that a majority of adivasis practice that faith. A book by Prof. Ram Dayal Munda called *Adi Dharm* outlining the key belief and rituals of the faith is appended as proof of the popular appeal of the religion. The petition argues that the absence of an assigned Sarna code and column ensures that followers of 'regional, local and other religions', which in Jharkhand number more than Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains, are deprived of their minority rights.<sup>81</sup> The High Court dismissed the petition saying it had 'no merit.'<sup>82</sup> It is interesting to note that the Catholic Church too is taking the issue of adivasi identity seriously. The website of Ranchi Archdiocese refers says the Christian population of Jharkhand is around 17 percent, much higher than the 4.05 percent figure of the 2001 Census. It also pointedly disavows attempts to alienate the sarna element in Jharkhand's Christian identity. A biographic sketch of Cardinal Telesphore Toppo in fact describes his religion as 'Catholic Christian sarna.'<sup>83</sup>

### The Koel Karo Movement

One popular movement against state development projects that is indicative of the struggles in areas of (relative) Christian tribal concentration in Jharkhand and the concert of political activism that has been brought to bear to hold off such encroachments has been the Koel Karo movement. The movement against Koel Karo Hydel Power Project (hereafter KKP) since 1977 serves as a model for pan tribal, inter-religious cooperation, particularly at the grassroot level, to successfully resist state attempts to takeover land for development purposes. It is now recognised in some activist circles as the most successful anti-dam movement in India by its ability to keep the coercive capacity of the state at bay just by the sheer novelty of tactics and unflinching tribal solidarity on this issue over the last 30 years. The project was supposed to have been completed by 1981 but it virtually made no progress despite various attempts to revive it. It came into prominence in February 2001, a tellingly ironical time i.e. three months after the formation of the Jharkhand state which the adivasis fought for, when eight people were killed and 27 wounded, all adivasis, after police fired on people gathered at Tapkara, near Torpa, to protest police brutality on a few tribals a day earlier.

The project was planned by the Bihar State Electricity Board (BSEB) in 1973 in the Koel Karo area, that lies 80 kilometres southwest of Ranchi, for the purpose of generating 710 megawatt of power for the benefit of Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Sikkim. The Koel River was to be dammed at Basia, near Majikhera and Tetra villages in Gumla district, and the north Karo River near Loajimi village in the Torpa block of Ranchi district. The two water reservoirs were to be linked

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Bonga, Swarna, Tana Bhagat and Tribal religion. In the 2001 census, those practising 'other religions' had gone up to 3,514,472, amounting to 13 percent of the total population. See <http://www.censusindia.net/religiondata/> accessed 9 September 2006.

<sup>81</sup> The petition pleads: 'That regional, local or other religions should not lose out in benefits or represent-ability as compared to even those religions that are normally enumerated as national religious minorities, particularly at the state level or Jharkhand level'. In the 1991 Census, there 78212 Sikhs, 23049 Jains and 3518 Buddhists in Bihar as compared to '1417427' classified as 'Swarna' followers.

<sup>82</sup> High Court of Jharkhand at Ranchi Order Sheet, Ruling by Chief Justice V. K. Gupta, Justice D.N. Prasad, WP (PIL) No. 3204 of 2001, dated 23 July 2001.

<sup>83</sup> <http://www.ranchiarchdiocese.org/prelate.htm>, accessed 10 September 2006.

by a 34.7-kilometer long canal.<sup>84</sup> There has been no unanimity about the number of villages to be submerged. The detailed project report claimed that only 42 villages would be affected while a Collector of Ranchi, B. K. Sinha, estimated in 1986 that 7,063 households in 112 villages would be affected.<sup>85</sup> The people's organization, Koel Karo Jan Sanghatan (KKJS), estimates that 256 villages would be submerged with a total population of 150,000, 90 percent of whom are adivasis.

The project area has a sizeable Christian population. Soma Munda, a sarna, who has been the president of KKJS for over a decade, put the figure roughly at 50 percent ('there are Christians in every village'; he also says that government officials blame Christians for the movement), while Jesuits reckon it to be close to 40 percent. Significantly, till the early 1990s, the KKJS did not seek or get help from organized civil society groups, including the Jesuits. The activists sought legal advice from lawyers and received technical advice on survey operations from Delhi-based academics, but the movement was wholly sustained by village level leadership, composed of khuntkattidars and educated adivasis with some organizing experience. Thus Koel Karo stands as a monument to inter-religious tribal collaboration at the grassroots.

Moses Guria, a resident of Loajimi and a schoolteacher who worked for worker's rights while working in Jamshedpur started the movement in 1975-76.<sup>86</sup> Moses grew up outside Jharkhand as his father worked in the Army as a chaplain during World War II. He too was a figure of some local renown; when he retired and bought a house near Tapkara, the village was renamed as Anandpur in his honour. Moses Guria, on learning that the BSEB was acquiring land and disbursing compensation, mobilized village leaders and urged them to merge existing interest groups called Jan Kalyan Samitis in the Koel and Karo regions to form the KKJS, of which he became the first president. They first launched a *kam roko* (stop work) campaign in December 1978, preventing the unloading of cement and steel from railway bogies at Pakra station for several days. (Mass mobilization is perceived to be easy once consensus over the struggle's worth is achieved; regular night meetings and impromptu rallies can be summoned in a matter of hours even in isolated areas through the traditional mode of relaying messages over drums.)

Negotiating strategy moved from maximalist positions that sacred groves (sarnas) and burial grounds of ancestors (sasandiris) cannot be submerged or removed to wrangling over the particulars of the resettlement package. These negotiations were punctuated by long stalemates. Following the *kam roko* ('stop work') agitation, the work was stalled but the movement agreed to a fresh survey to ascertain the extent of affected area. The survey was conducted but the results were withheld from KKJS. Soma Munda says 'the government was bent on deceiving us.' The BSEB exhausted by the agitation and spiralling project costs handed over the project in April 1980 to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC). By 1983, the KKJS prepared a complete rehabilitation package that included demands to relocate 256 villages, 152 sacred groves and nearly 300 burial grounds.

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<sup>84</sup> For a detailed survey of the project see *An Independent Enquiry into the Police Firing at Tapkara: Resistance to the Koel-Karo Project, Jharkhand* by The Indian People's Tribunal of Environment and Human Rights, headed by Justice Rajinder Sachar, January 2002.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. pdf document, p. 14.

<sup>86</sup> This account of the Koel Karo movement has been reconstructed from interviews in the Koel Karo area principally with Soma Munda, president, KKJS, Marcus Guria, vice-president, Rejan Guria, Secretary, KKJS and other activists in the area in addition to the Indian People's Tribunal report.



In 1985, around 300 CRPF and Home Guard personnel were introduced in the forested area near Loajimi even as negotiations were on in Ranchi with the KKJS leadership. These are narrated with some hilarity by Soma Munda who recalls the days when the paramilitary force moved in:

The District Collector and SDO were, in the course of talks, entertaining us; urging us to eat more and more of the good south Indian food that was laid out for us. They thought we are fools! They were trying to convince us about the usefulness of the project. We were telling him that khuntkatti lands are not transferable; that sacred groves cannot be violated. And then the Deputy Commissioner tells us that the CRPF is being stationed there to 'keep the peace.' I said, peace was always there beforehand; you were the one who brought *ashanti* (conflict) in our midst.<sup>87</sup>

The people immediately adopted non-cooperation tactics, which were effective as the camp was in the inaccessible forested area adjacent to the Koel River amidst an unpaved landscape, and at least eight kilometres off the Torpa main road. Women adivasis prevented the CRPF men from cutting wood, and the latter were threatened by the villagers that the bathing and drinking water would be poisoned. Also no adivasi volunteered to work for them and there was a liquor boycott in place as well. The Torpa Block Development Officer (BDO) was prevented from visiting the area also by women. A round the clock monitoring of the camp also created everyday sanitation issues for the troops. The Committee ordered sowing plants and shrubs on the kuccha road made by the troops to the area. When the plants blossomed, the troops were instantly accused of driving over their lands and threatened litigation to that effect. After 15 days, in July 1985, the CRPF left the area quietly by night.

Later that year the KKJS offered the NHPC two villages – Bhagidera, near Tetra in the Koel region and Kamda near Koccha in the Karo region – to build the model resettlement villages on traditional lines featuring spaces for a sacred grove and a burial ground. But the NHPC did not bother to explore this option. There was a lull for a decade till Laloo Prasad Yadav, chief minister of Bihar, announced in June 1995 that Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao would lay the foundation stone of the Koel Karo project. By this time the KKJS had decided to totally reject the project. Munda felt: We had no faith in GOI. We decided that it was futile to hold talks with the government and then we finally rejected the project, demanding its end for all time. Guria adds: We realized that we could not fight the *sarkar*, but we also knew that the *sarkar* was *shaitan* (the devil). We have seen the effects of HEC, steel plants at Rourkela and Durgapur where rehabilitation never happened. So we decided never to accept the project in principle. We will just fight non-violently through *jan shakti* (people power).

Accordingly, nearly 16000 adivasis gathered at Torpa for a week prior to inauguration day on 5 July 1995 to occupy the field where the Prime Minister and Chief Minister's helicopter was supposed to land. 'It was peaceful and exhilarating; we did not carry our bow and arrows. There were massive meetings. Eventually the PM did not come and the inauguration was postponed indefinitely,' says an activist. By this time the movement attracted the support of mainstream adivasi politicians like N.E. Horo, Stephen Marandi, Ram Dayal Munda and activists across Jharkhand who openly supported the agitation.

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Soma Munda, April 2005.

After Jharkhand was formed, the BJP Chief Minister Arjun Munda reportedly went on record saying that Koel Karo will be decided by the will of the people.<sup>88</sup> In August 2003, the Chief Minister announced that the Koel Karo project would be scrapped. He merely stated that escalating project costs of Rs 7.92 per unit of electricity and the cost of rehabilitation made the project unviable.<sup>89</sup> There is a view that the project was scrapped because of competing interests lobbying for thermal power, and newspaper reports barely give credence to the role of the KKJS in 'scrapping' the project.

However, the KKJS is not impressed. By April 2005, nearly two years later, the Government of Jharkhand had not issued a gazette notification to back the Chief Minister's statement. If the notification is not forthcoming in the near future, this could be a case of deferring state gratification, as it were, to dissipate adivasi anger and wait for bonds of aboriginal fury to loosen. This is a periodical strategy deployed to 'normalize' the activists whose levels of education and exposure draw them toward urban modes of living or simply lead them to 'settle down' following which plans to revive projects like the Koel Karo can be re-announced. This was evident in interviews with student activists involved in both Koel Karo and Netarhat movements who felt they had personally lost out because of selfless involvement in the movement for years. One young Catholic Netarhat activist, in his late twenties and previously an office-bearer of the Palamau Student Union, who is currently struggling to make a living in Ranchi as a stringer for Hindi newspapers, says that he has stopped urging younger people to join popular agitations as it harms their long-term individual prospects.

### **Christianity and Culture: Obstacles to inter-religious cooperation**

What have been the challenges to such inter-religious mobilization? Informants point to the Christian clergy's disdain for adivasi belief which is transmitted particularly to both the average congregant and upwardly mobile Christians that create wedges among communities. In villages observant Christians are not known to participate in the *sarbul* puja. Not only that, the Sal flower is sacred for sarnas as it is used in the Sarhul puja. Christians have a tendency to trivialise by using Sal flower as a decorative piece. There is also a convention that the Sal flower should not be brought into the village before the Sarhul puja. In times when Easter falls prior to Sarhul, Christians violate this Sarna custom by bringing the flower into the villages to decorate their churches and houses thus alienating fellow sarnas. 'Why cannot they get any other flower,' fumes Kalyan Munda.

There is an offering solicited among villagers for a sarna puja which is traditionally held before threshing grain. Christians are known not to contribute to the offering, sometimes provocatively countering: 'why should I give donation here when I give my offering to the church. Do you help me with my offering to the church?' This kind of cultural inflexibility is existent in villages even when Munda Christians in the region are not known to be fervent revivalist believers. The Christian clergy is blamed for these strictures whereby participation in traditional sarna rituals are considered sinful.

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<sup>88</sup> KKJS activists wonder which people he might refer to: people in Ranchi or people in Delhi?

<sup>89</sup> Munda said "This was a very good project provided it was completed 20 years ago as initially proposed. But the successive governments of unified Bihar were not serious about the project because of which the cost went up from Rs. 350 crore to Rs 2,500 crore." 'Curtains come down on project,' *The Telegraph*, 30 August 2003.

A couple of sarna activists also objected to the Christian habit of burying the dead with the head pointing west in contrast to the sarnas facing south. This is thought to be the idea of missionaries. However the Khunti diocese Archbishop denied that Christians had any such burial customs.

Also in the villages, the norm is to greet one another with a slight bow of the head and a folding of the hands (about chest high) and saying 'Johar'! Sarna activists take umbrage to Christians refraining from saying 'Johar'; a word that roughly means 'may the fruits of this land satisfy you.' Educated non-Christian tribals frequently greet each other with Johar but educated or observant Christians reportedly prefer the urban habit of the handshake. Another thing which incenses activists like Kalyan Munda is that observant Christians prefer to say 'Jai Masihi ki' (Victory to Christ) to each other. He says 'imagine a scenario when ten people have gathered for idle talk and then a Christian comes along and greets most of them with 'Johar' and then says 'Jai Masihi ki' to a couple of Christians – think of the effect it has on the rest. They will think that he is thicker with them than us.' Some sarnas resent that Christian schools were getting increasingly profited oriented; that they favour Christian students and that sarna students are subject to Christian instruction that leads to conversion.

Nirmal Minz, a former Bishop of the Gossner Evangelical Lutheran Church, faults the Church's cultural policy for alienating adivasi Christians from sarna brethren.

The theology, liturgy, canon law, church discipline, practice and life style of the community continue to be as in the days of the missionaries... The attitude that regards primal religion as superstitious and devil worship, and the tribal people as heathens still continues to remain the same... The lay members of the congregations and churches are more fundamentalist and less evangelical in their outlook. Poor Hindi or Santali translations of German, English, Danish, Norwegian and American hymns and songs introduced by the missionaries are still used and actually preferred to the indigenous songs and hymns in the worship services. The use of traditional tribal drums and music and instruments are still taboo for the churches in Chotanagpur. The city congregations would prefer to use English songs rather than the hymns and songs in the vernacular language. Preaching in the mother tongue has not taken the pains to go to the original biblical languages to translate and interpret scriptures. Second and third hand resources have been accepted as adequate in congregations. The tribal languages are used, but worldviews of the indigenous peoples are not acknowledged. In fact, they are rejected as being heathen. The cognitive approach is preferred to intuitive/mystical and visionary ways of knowing and understanding.<sup>90</sup>

Such inter-religious schisms have led some sarna activists to demand that tribal Christians should no longer get quotas in jobs and education.<sup>91</sup> Hindu nationalists are reportedly patronising the *pahans* (adivasi priests) in the villages in an attempt to exploit anti-Christian sentiment and also

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<sup>90</sup> Nirmal Minz, *Rise Up, My People, and Claim the Promise: The Gospel among the Tribes of India*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1997, p. 53.

<sup>91</sup> 'Strip converts of quota benefits, demand tribals', <http://www.newkerala.com/news4.php?action=fullnews&id=11538>, posted 25 August 2006. This is a demand that has cropped up periodically over the years. In October 1968, Karthik Oroan, a leading adivasi politician, deposed before a joint committee of parliament demanding that Christians be descheduled, ostensibly in response to Christians garnering greater share of jobs due to higher educational levels. Adivasi Ekta Parishad petitioned that Christians should be descheduled on the grounds that they never called themselves Adivasis, refused to associate with adivasis in social and religious ceremonies and that the Christians started claiming to be adivasis only after reservations were introduced. Vidyarthi and Sahay op. cit, 116 and 123.

posit the priests as a counter to traditional Munda headmen who either lead popular agitations or are in a position to control panchayats should elections be held in the future.<sup>92</sup> Such divisions explain BJP's electoral successes to an extent but do not significantly undermine scope for organising popular agitations.

## Conclusion

This paper indicates that the sizeable institutional presence of Christianity and its rhetorical empathy for adivasi concerns creates the context for politicising youth and sustaining the discourse of subordination that undergirds tribal politics in Jharkhand today. (It is also worth clarifying that Christian activism in the state is not discernibly backed by foreign missionary groups.) Christian activists are deploying their educational advantage and links with national and transnational civil society groups by active involvement in popular agitations through informal protest formations and networks. As seen in the case of Ratnaker Bhengra, they are also involved in attempts to clarify adivasi identity with a view to clinch state patronage in the newly-formed province. Of particular interest are the informal networks of Jesuit, Protestant and non-Christian sarna activists who are able to forge protest clusters quickly and coordinate advocacy and mobilisation strategies against the state or industrial projects. The study notes that for Christian activists reviewed here, adivasi identity is privileged over religious belonging in so far as it is expressed in favour of political objectives and this is linked to distinctive legacies of conversion. Religious differentiation thus has not significantly undermined collaborative partnerships with non-Christian adivasis against common adversaries, although conservative cultural stances of the clergy are a constraining factor. And uneven links between grassroots associations and Christian clergy hamper electoral coordination although anecdotal evidence exists for certain areas.

These dynamics are significant for the way both Christians social movements are likely to be perceived and represented particularly at a time when the latter are able to contain the momentum of liberalisation-led industrialising agenda. The interplay of economic potential and socio-political vulnerability in Jharkhand has already seen dramatic developments, beyond the phenomena of popular agitations considered above. In July 2006, the head of the steel giant Arcelor-Mittal, Lakshmi Mittal, decided to move his investments in Jharkhand worth \$9 billion to neighbouring Orissa, partly due to problems linked to land acquisition – doubtlessly a result of the activist momentum built up networks of social movements.<sup>93</sup>

As the exigencies of political order and investor confidence take centre-stage, it is likely that social movement activism will be viewed with deep suspicion by both state and non-state actors with interests in accelerated industrialisation. Already the airtime recently granted to purported Maoist threats appears proportionate to the stalled pace of industrialisation owing to popular agitations in Jharkhand and elsewhere. News organisations frequently report purported Maoist plans to wage war against 'special economic zones', following a meeting of 100 'naxal' leaders

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<sup>92</sup> This is conceivably a historic correction since the Pahan enjoyed equal status with the Munda till the latter's civil duties conferred greater authority from the onset of colonialism by virtue of being in the forefront of advocacy campaigns to recover land.

<sup>93</sup> See Surojit Chatterjee, 'Mittal may junk Jharkhand if progress not satisfactory,' *International Business Times*, at <http://in.ibtimes.com/articles/20060715/mittal-jharkhand-munda-patnaik-steel-posco-greenfield-investment-ore-mines-iron-naveen.htm>, posted 15 July 2006 and "Thank you' Mittal shifts deal to Orissa', *The Indian Express*, 8 July 2006, at <http://www.indianexpress.com/story/8038.html>

from 16 states.<sup>94</sup> In view of these polarising agendas, it is not inconceivable that social movement activism will be viewed through securitised perspectives – more so when it comes to the practices of Christian institutions and activists given that the latter are projected as merely conversionary agents by opposing Hindu nationalist groups. To that end, the implications of Christian activism may well have significance for other politically volatile states like Chhattisgarh, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh that are fraught with the competing demands of marginalized adivasis, Hindu nationalist cadres, the extractive drives of foreign and national capital, and the ambitions of Maoist revolutionaries.

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<sup>94</sup> According to leaked minutes of the naxal meeting held in the forests bordering Jharkhand and Orissa, Maoists reportedly plan to arm locals where SEZs and transform guerrilla units to mobile units that can strike across the country. See 'Naxals rebels plan attack on SEZs', at <http://www.ndtv.com/template/template.asp?fromtimeline=true&id=101995&callid=1&template=naxalviolence>, 12 March 2007.



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