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Dimensions of Indian Civilization – Outsiders' part in it Christopher Becker SDS and John B. Hoffmann SJ and their contribution to promote tribal communities in India

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The concept paper of this symposium starts with „Indian society is marked with its rich heritage that is the hallmark of our civilization“. Here two different terms are used: society and civilization and both are related to the adjective “Indian“. The term “civilization“ is widely used but it has no fixed meaning¹. I will work with the notion given above. Indian society is composed of many linguistic and ethnic groups. Indian civilization is an integration of many cultural elements. It is also a result of its recent history of colonization and independence, social and cultural developments and changes. It is also a constant search for its unique identity and unity that is much debated and has to be debated to integrate the vast number of different ethnic communities with their particular linguistic, cultural and religious traditions into the wider concept of the Indian society and civilization. It makes

¹ W.H. McNeill, *Civilization*, in: *Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 7, p. 1-6, here p. 1.

India very unique in our modern world society. We can use the term *Indian civilization* in the singular, if we properly understand the ancient Indian way of different ethnic and religiously defined communities living together under a common umbrella of an Indian political entity that we call "state".

India has an old tradition of being secular and of respecting the differences between the various cultural and religious communities. As any human society, India did not always find an ideal solution to solve the contradictions, rivalries and conflicts among the different communities. The Caste system is - in one way - bringing harmony to the various classes and groups inside a Hindu society, but - on the other hand - causing the problem: what about the communities outside the Hindu tradition? How do they relate to the Indian society and how do they contribute to the strength of the Indian civilization? For the Indian anthropologist S.M. Michael the Indian society "has been multicultural for ages, multilinguistic, multireligious, and multiracial. India has been known for her cultural and social diversity since time immemorial"². This richness of India has always impressed outsiders as it has always impressed me as a man originating from the Western world. My mother tongue is German and I grew up in post-war Western Germany. I was socialized in a Catholic German community in the Rhineland. As a member of an international Mission Society I could make pastoral experiences in the other part of our globe, in the highlands of Papua New Guinea and I could teach since 1993, first in PNG, then in Germany, Philippines and since 2002 in Rome. Most of my life in the last 30 years I lived outside of my home country. I could experience the need of mutual understanding among people of different cultural and linguistic origin every day in my lectures and in my own SVD community.

I would like to show you two men, who have come over a century ago to India and have contributed to the development a specific, often neglected and non-recognized part of the Indian society, I mean the tribal communities of India. Both were members of a missionary community and came from Germany. They stayed the best years of their lives in India in tribal communities in Chota Nagpur and in Assam. How did they understand the Indian civilization? They inserted themselves in a particular place and among particular people. And what made their journey of learning so meaningful for them was their empathy for the people they lived with.

² S.M. Michael, *Christianity & Cultures, Authentic in Dialogue: Beyond Relativism and Ethnocentrism*, in: L. Stanislaus, A. D'Souza (eds.), *Prophetic Dialogue. Challenges and Prospects in India*, Pune-Delhi 2003, p. 89.

1. Christopher Becker life among the tribes in Assam

Christopher Becker SDS (1875-1937)³ entered the congregation of the Society of the Divine Saviour, founded in 1881, better known as Salvatorians, in 1889 and was ordained priest in 1898 in Rome⁴. In 1915 Becker, together with his German confrere was interned and had to leave India in 1916. He worked for 10 years as the leader of the Catholic Mission in Assam. Back in Germany, he founded the Medical Mission Institute in Wuerzburg in 1922, which he had headed for 15 years. In the 1920s he occupied himself with his Indian experience. In 1922 he published his book *Indisches Kastenwesen und christliche Mission – Indian caste system and Christian mission* – and in 1923 his great work *Im Stromtal des Bramaputra*. Thanks to the efforts of Sebastian Karotemprel this work was translated into English and published in 2007 in India under the title *The Catholic Church in Northeast India 1890-1915*⁵.

1.1. The Salvatorian Catholic Mission in Assam

Becker writes:

“The customs and habits of the hill tribes differ from those of the people in India in many ways. Whether this is a sign of backwardness, is debatable. I want, however, to point out to the fact that perhaps we are dealing here with primitive tribes whose ancestors – in previous times – might have reached a high degree of culture [...]. Some customs and habits of the hill tribes are certainly praiseworthy and acceptable to a mis-

³ After years of preparation Rome finally erected the Apostolic Prefecture of Assam on December 15th, 1889, and put it under the care of the newly founded Society of the Divine Saviour. Only after the papal approval of the Society of the Divine Saviour in 1905 was the condition for the appointment of one of the members of that congregation as prefect apostolic fulfilled, and Father Christopher Becker SDS, the superior of the Salvatorian College in Meran, Tyrol (Austria, since 1918 Italy), was appointed the first Apostolic Prefect of Assam. He arrived on March 17, 1906. The years before his appointment in January 1906 to become the first Apostolic Prefect of Assam, he taught at the Salvatorian seminary at Meran, South Tyrol, at that time part of Austria (nowadays Italy).

⁴ The Catholic Church in Northeast India is the title of the English translation of the outstanding research work on the first Apostolic Prefect of Assam, Northeast India had written after he was exiled from India in the 1920s. The German-born author was a member of the Salvatorians.

⁵ Ch. Becker, *The Catholic Church in Northeast India 1890-1915*, revised & edited by S. Karotemprel, Shillong 2007.

sionary. In this respect, they are even superior to the people of India. Besides, the great simplicity and the naturalness found among the tribes shows, that they are free from the powerful, all-embracing and insurmountable barrier of the caste system with all its negative influences which are built into the very fabric of the Indian social life. This is the great stumbling block on the road to progress for the Indian people. This is also the greatest obstacle for conversion to Christianity. Among the hill tribes there are no castes. They eat and drink together without any caste distinction [...]. There is a certain democratic spirit pervading the whole organization of tribal life and action [...]. In addition to this, there is another positive element in the tribal society, namely, the position of woman. The position of woman in the tribal society means a lot for mission work, especially when we consider her influence in the family and in the education of children. This is not so in the other parts of India”⁶.

The Salvatorians had already successfully started to lay the foundations for a missionary church in Assam since 1890. Becker was able to consolidate the mission and establish new mission stations among the not-yet-reached ethnic groups in his prefecture.

1.2. The promotion of the tribal communities by the means of education

At the beginning of Chapter XIII Becker clarifies: “There was never any question of mass conversion in Assam. The slow, painful, fatiguing, method of personal approach had to be followed”⁷. Without native co-evangelizers, the Catholic mission in Assam would have never been able to evangelize great parts of the tribal communities. The recruiting and training of catechist was therefore a priority. “The missionaries of Assam were unanimous in their view about the necessity of the role of catechists”⁸. A catechetical centre was opened up in Shillong.

He made the Catholic mission even more attractive by providing educational and health care institutions for the local population. Salvatorian Sisters arrived in 1896. Becker convinced the Loretto sisters from Calcutta to open an English school for girls in Shillong in 1909

⁶ Ibidem, p. 260-261.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 329.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 334.

which developed into the first government-recognized English Higher Secondary School in the Assam province. He convinced also the Irish Christian Brothers to come to Assam.

“The demand for schools grew with the spread of Christianity. Gradually the parents perceived the usefulness of education for their children [...] This was an urgent need in the Khasi Hills [...] The Methodists had made the school their principal activity”⁹.

1.3. The importance of Becker’s publication

With the expulsion of the German Salvatorians from British India in 1915, the Apostolic Prefect dedicated his energy to writing the history of the Salvatorian mission in Assam.

Becker’s book mirrors his knowledge of religious traditions and folk religiosity, cultural anthropology, linguistics, geography and even botanic studies of the Assam province. The first part of the monograph has the title *The Land, its History and Religions* (p. 3-67). It shows the awareness and eagerness of a missionary leader to understand the land and its people, and it reveals the European and Catholic understanding of the religions and cultures found in Assam. The second part of the book treats the *Catholic Missionary Activity in Assam up to 1890* (p. 71-156). Assam was not reached by Catholic missionaries for centuries. There were some Christians back in the 17th century¹⁰. The third part of the book, entitled *Assam under the German Salvatorian Missionar-*

⁹ “In the year 1910, the Sisters of the Divine Saviour in Shillong opened a school for domestic science with a government grant towards the building... Development in the fields of education and in the school system, the need for better teachers and catechists for the mission and the desire of our Catholics to obtain better positions made it imperative to establish a Catholic Middle English School. St. Anthony’s School in Shillong was the answer to the problem. It was opened on the 1st May, 1908”. Ibidem, p. 345, 346-347.

¹⁰ The missionaries of the Paris Foreign Mission Society (MEP) saw Assam only as a territory which allowed them to realize their dream of reaching Tibet - attempts at which failed in 1851 and 1853. Finally, the newly-founded Milan Foreign Mission Society (PIME) accepted the invitation to join the Bengal mission in India. But it was not before the summer of 1872 that they allowed Father Jacobo Broy, who worked since 1866 in Central Bengal, to work in Assam. On his own and cut off from any fraternal missionary support, Fr. Broy’s energy was consumed in building up a small Catholic community of Anglo-Indian and foreign Catholics in the Assam province. No indigenous missionary work started in his time, which lasted from 1872 to 1890.

ies (p. 159-442), finally arrives at the real foundation of the Catholic Church among several ethnic communities of Assam. The new missionaries first sought out Catholic workers from Chota Nagpur in the tea plantations of Assam, which depended on workers from outside the province. Many natives from Chota Nagpur had been evangelized by Jesuits in the Bengal mission. They lived dispersed – often hiding their religious affiliation – in significant numbers in the tea plantations of Assam. The second step was to reach out to the many indigenous ethnic groups of Assam itself – which had previously been hostile to any missionary outreach. Part of the mission approach was the erection of Catholic villages. Becker writes:

“It was not a strange thing, therefore, for those who were about to join the Catholic Church, to pull down their houses and reconstruct them elsewhere along with people of the same faith. Several purely Catholic villages came up in different places as a result of this practice. The people themselves were inclined to change their villages when they changed their religion, as they wished to manifest the inner change exteriorly”¹¹.

When this population saw the achievements of the Catholic mission in the educational and health sectors their hostility was replaced by curiosity and interest. The quarter of a century during which the German Salvatorian missionaries remained in Assam became the period when the Catholic Church became rooted in Northeast India.

2. Fr John B. Hoffmann’s way to understand the Munda people

My contribution on John B. Hoffmann relies on his own work¹². Another important source is the work of a native of Chotanagpur. Fr Peter Tete S.J. did a thorough research on J. B. Hoffmann for his dissertation at the Gregorian University in Rome in 1993¹³.

¹¹ Ch. Becker, *The Catholic Church in Northeast India...*, op. cit., p. 341.

¹² Henceforth I quote from this book: *37 Jahre in Indien von Johannes B. Hoffmann S.J., Tröstliche Erfahrungen beim Naturvolk der Mundas*, Innsbruck 1923, Aachen 1927². The translation into English is my work.

¹³ P. Tete, *A Missionary Social Worker in India: J.B. Hoffmann, the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act and the Catholic Co-operatives 1893-1928* (Documenta Missionalia 18), Roma 1984.

2.1. From the Rhineland, Germany to India

John B. Hoffmann was born on June 27, 1857 in Wallendorf. In 1877 he joined the Society of Jesus. In the same year he went to India, studied at St. Xavier's College, Calcutta (1883-1887) and was ordained in 1891. In 1893 he started work in Chotanagpur.

2.2. The situation of the native people in India

According to the 2001 census ethnic groups and communities comprise 8.6 % of India's total population (88.8 million)¹⁴.

Father Hoffman writes:

“When, at the beginning of the 19th century, the British stepped into the forested mountains of Chota Nagpur, they found native remnants there that are much more different from the Aryan Indians in every respect than the English themselves [...]. Their languages differed not only in roots and sentence structure, but also in the whole conception of language itself from the Indo-European [...]. They were alone without writing, without a temple, without any outward sign of religion and God's customary, simple children of nature who subsisted by hunting and herbs and also operated a very undeveloped farming. There are the remains of the original inhabitants of India, who were once driven by the Aryan invaders in the mountains and had defended themselves for thousands of years from the invaders they hated so much. They thought and lived as a people four or five thousand years ago, believed and lived. An ancient civilization suddenly transferred from the ancient time to the 19th century”¹⁵.

¹⁴ Cf. V. Xasa, *Dialogue with Marginalized Tribes*, in: L. Stanislaus, A. D'Souza (eds.), *Prophetic Dialogue...*, op. cit., p. 62.

¹⁵ „Als die Engländer zu Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts in die waldbedeckten Berge von Chota-Nagpur eindringen, fanden sie dort Stammesüberreste, die in jeder Beziehung von den arischen Indern viel verschiedener sind, als die Engländer selber. [...] Ihre Sprachen wichen nicht nur in Wurzeln und Satzbau, sondern auch in der ganzen Auffassung der Sprache selber von den indogermanischen ab. In Indien, dem typischen Lande der uralten heiligen Schriften und der Tempel, waren sie allein ohne Schrift, ohne Tempel, ohne irgendein äußeres Zeichen von Religion und Gotteskunde, einfache Naturkinder, die sich von Jagd und Kräutern nährten und auch einen sehr unentwickelten Ackerbau betrieben. Es sind die Überreste der Ureinwohner Indiens, die einst von den arischen Eroberern in die Berge vertrieben worden waren und dort seit Jahrtausenden von den ihnen verhassten Eindringlingen sich abgeschlossen hatten.

Chotanagpur was inhabited by Munda's, Oraon's, and Kari'as. Hoffmann accurately describes the position of the Munda's:

“On the land rights they had a sentence which they always had on their lips: «Our ancestors have snatched the fields to the poison fang of the serpent and the jaws of the tiger, we plough and sow, God sends sunshine and rain. What has Zemindar (landowner) done since then? Why should we pay him rent? But their language was not understood, and what was even less understood, was their simple, straight thinking. As a result the first bloody uprising started. But what could a bow and an arrow achieve against battle experienced English cavalry! The situation of the Munda's worsened in itself just because of fighting against oppression»”¹⁶.

The British mistook the legal order of the aborigines and supported demands of the Hindu land owners who supposedly could integrate the “backward” natives into their legal system and their economic interests. “The Tribals however, have not remained silent spectators [...]. They have resisted the encroachment of both by the state and non-tribal people. [...] Indeed their resistance is going on even today in different parts of the country”¹⁷ writes an Indian author in 2003. For the natives it was a question of survival.

2.3. Hoffmann's assessment of the conflict of the Indian tribes

Father Hoffmann became their knowledgeable defender and promoter. “This *Naturvolk*, people of nature, was suddenly confronted

Sie dachten und lebten, wie die Menschen vor vier- und fünftausend Jahren dachten, glaubten und lebten. Eine uralte Gesittung, unvermittelt von der alten Zeit ins 19. Jahrhundert versetzt“, in: J.B. Hoffmann, *37 Jahre Missionär in Indien. Tröstliche Erfahrungen beim Naturvolk der Mundas, der Misserfolg der Missionierung höherer Kasten und seine Ursachen*, Innsbruck 1923, p. 5-6.

¹⁶ „Über die Landrechte haben sie einen Satz, den sie immer im Munde führen: «Unsere Vorfahren haben die Felder dem Giftzahn der Schlange und dem Rachen des Tigers entrissen, wir pflügen und säen, Gott schickt Sonnenschein und Regen. Was hat da der Zemindar (Gutsbesitzer) getan? Warum sollen wir ihm dann Pacht zahlen? Aber man verstand ihre Sprache nicht, und was man noch weniger verstand, waren ihre einfachen, geraden Gedankengänge. Da kam es zu einem ersten blutigen Aufstand. Doch was sollen Pfeil und Bogen gegen kampfeübte englische Kavallerie! Die Lage der Mundas verschlimmerte sich nur durch diesen an sich gerechten Kampf gegen Unterdrückung»“. Ibidem, p. 8.

¹⁷ V. Xasa, *Dialogue with Marginalized Tribes*, op. cit., p. 66.

with the so-called modern culture, that culture of which the Americans say, «that it has civilized off already so many races»¹⁸.

“The Hindu usurers and adventurers who were under the protection of the British invaders along with the Hindu-sized king of Chota Nagpur, presented themselves to the British court as landowners, and from then on, because even the Englishmen have been born with the fixed idea that all land can only be owned by a landowner and never by a working farmer, the Mundas were pretty quickly transformed out of free owners of their villages into miserable starving tenants, as in Ireland”¹⁹.

2.4. The friendship with the mission pioneer Constantin Lievens

Hoffmann himself writes about his early friendship with his Flemish confrere:

“Finally, in 1885, the Belgian Father Lievens SJ (1856-1893) arrived and finally settled in a village called Torpa. I was with him in our seminar in Asansol and another year in the college of Calcutta. We were close friends because we had the same desires and views over the conversion of the heathen. But I still had to remain five years more in the college as a professor of philosophy before I could follow him to the missions”²⁰.

¹⁸ „Über dieses Naturvolk brach die sogenannte moderne Kultur mit einer verhängnisvollen Plötzlichkeit herein, jene Kultur, von welcher der Amerikaner sagt: «that it has civilized off already so many races»; das ist jene Kultur, die schon so viele Rassen von der Welt wegzivilisiert hat“ (J.B. Hoffmann, *37 Jahre Missionär in Indien...*, op. cit., p. 7-8).

¹⁹ „Die unter dem Schutze der Engländer eindringenden Hindu-Wucherer und Abenteurer in Verbindung mit dem hinduisierten König von Chota-Nagpur stellten sich dem ursprünglich einzigen, englischen Gerichte als Großgrundbesitzer vor, und da nun einmal der Engländer mit der fixen Idee geboren ist, dass alles Land nur einem Großgrundbesitzer gehören kann und niemals dem bearbeitenden Bauer, wurden die Mundas ziemlich schnell von freien Besitzern ihrer Dörfer in elend hungernde Pächter verwandelt, wie in Irland“. Ibidem, p. 8.

²⁰ „Endlich im Jahre 1885 kam der Belgier P. Lievens SJ (1856-1893) und lies sich in einem Dorfe namens Torpa nieder. Ich war zusammen mit ihm in unserem Seminar in Asansol und noch ein Jahr im Kollegium zu Kalkutta. Wir waren enger befreundet, weil wir über die Heidenbekehrung dieselben Wünsche und Ansichten hatten. Ich musste aber noch vorerst fünf Jahre lang im Kollegium als Philosophieprofessor hängen bleiben, ehe ich ihm ins Missionsfeld nachfol-

2.5. Success and failure of the mission method of Constantin Lievens

“The Chota Nagpur-Mission is often considered as the most flourishing mission around the world. A lot of wrong things have been written about that mission, which is misleading, consequently, as far as missionary methods are concerned. Since it is now extremely important to know the truth, I will tell you what Fr Lievens told myself about it: «I was already in Torpa for months and could not achieve any conversion. One day I shared my disappointments with a Hindu police Sub-inspector who was very grateful to me; I had, in fact, given him a medicine that saved the life of his seriously ill wife. This man replied to my complaint, *If you want to have Christians, then you have to take over the defence of the Mundas in the forced labour question and in the lease question. If you do this, you get as many as you want.* I did what he told me, and how he predicted, so it happened»²¹.

Lievens and Hoffmann shared the same mission ideals. The defence of the human rights of the tribal population could not be separated from their evangelization work and had even priority in this social context. Of course, also Lievens was also aware of its ambivalence. Forty years earlier, the Lutheran Gossner Mission of Berlin, had the same experience. The work of the missionaries for the rights of the indigenous people had indeed triggered a mass movement to the Lutheran mission, but this quickly collapsed when the expectations of the natives could not be met.

gen durfte“. Ibidem, p. 9.

²¹ „Die Chota-Nagpur-Mission wird vielfach – und besonders in Propagandakreisen in Rom – als die blühendste der ganzen Welt angesehen. Es ist manches Unrichtige über sie geschrieben worden, was in der Frage der Missionsmethoden irreleiten muss. Da es nun überaus wichtig ist, gerade in einem solchen Falle die Wahrheit zu kennen, will ich kurz und wörtlich berichten, was mir P. Lievens selber über den Anfang seiner großen Erfolge und deren Ursachen erzählte: «Ich war bereits Monate in Torpa und konnte keine einzige Bekehrung erzielen. Darüber beklagte ich mich eines Tages bei einem Hindu-Polizei-Subinspektor, der mir sehr dankbar war; ich hatte ihm nämlich eine Medizin gegeben, die seiner schwerkranken Frau das Leben rettete. Dieser Mann antwortete mir auf meine Klage: Wenn Sie Christen haben wollen, dann übernehmen Sie die Verteidigung der Mundas in der Zwangsarbeiterfrage und in der Pachtfrage. Wenn Sie das tun, kriegen Sie so viele, als sie wollen». Ich tat, was er mir riet, und wie er vorausgesagt, so geschah es“. Ibidem, p. 10.

“The figures show what this short sentence *So it be done* means: in two short years he had over 50,000 followers, of whom 10,000 were baptized. In 1889 there were approximately 100,000. Then the setback happened in the same way as it had happened in the Lutheran Gossner Mission. Naturally, P. Lievens had little time for religious education, as he was called from village to village to give advice in the never-ending disputes and processes with the zemindars. The lessons had to be passed over to the quickly fetched, mostly young, priests from Belgium and few catechists. But in the area where there were three difficult languages to learn, learning the native language, and thus the teaching was very slow. The baptized barely had the essentials class, the vast majority were for the time being only just followers in the league against the zemindars, as they called themselves. Some schools for teaching the youth were opened”²².

“Unfortunately, the fury and the arrogance of the more and more swelling masses let the missionaries not have time to adopt appropriate rules to maturity. The people believed that the time had come to settle permanently with the oppressors. When outrages occurred against landlords, the local officials stepped in. In a preliminary study, most catechists were arrested as troublemakers and the Catholic Mission was accused of indiscretion. In the actual processes most of those arrested were acquitted”²³.

²² „Was dieser kurze Satz: «So geschehe es» bedeutet, zeigen die folgenden Zahlen: in zwei kurzen Jahren hatte er über 50.000 Anhänger, davon 10.000 getaufte. Im Jahre 1889 waren es annähernd 100.000. Da kam der Rückschlag, derselbe, wie in der lutherischen Goßner-Mission. Natürlich hatte P. Lievens wenig Zeit zum Religionsunterricht, da er von Dorf zu Dorf gerufen wurde, um Rat zu geben in den nie endenden Streitigkeiten und Prozessen mit den Zemindars. Der Unterricht musste den von Belgien schnell herangeholten, meist jungen Patres und den wenigen Katechisten überlassen werden. Aber in einer Gegend, wo es drei schwierige Sprachen zu lernen gab, ging das Erlernen der Eingeborenen-sprache und somit das Unterrichten sehr langsam. Auch die Getauften hatten kaum den notwendigen Unterricht, die allermeisten waren einstweilen eben erst Mitläufer im Bunde gegen die Zemindars, wie sie sich selber bezeichneten. Auch einige Schulen zum Unterricht der Jugend wurden eröffnet“. Ibidem, p. 10-11.

²³ „Leider ließ das Ungestüm und der Übermut der immer mehr anschwellenden Massen den Missionären keine Zeit, die getroffenen Maßregeln zur Reife zu bringen. Das Volk glaubte, jetzt sei die Zeit gekommen, mit den Unterdrückern endgültig abzurechnen. Sobald nun da und dort Ausschreitungen gegen

“What could one expect of those insufficiently informed neophytes? They had indeed only enrolled themselves as Christians to receive the protection and assistance in their processes. So now [...] most turned against the mission. We all suffered emotionally a lot, but Fr Lievens suffered most. His health was ruined by over-work and fever. In August, he was sent to Belgium to make a last attempt to save his life, but [...] died. At that time we knew no longer whether we had thirty-, twenty-, ten thousand Christians or less”²⁴.

2.6. Years of Crisis

“Soon we learned that the Patriot League everywhere strongly agitated against us and against all Europeans, and that an accomplished young Lutheran with some education, called Birsá raised himself to the Prophet and Savior of the Mundas. He created a new religion, did «miracles» and gathered disciples around him, and from the whole country countless pilgrims came to him. He settled [...] three hours away from my

Gutsbesitzer vorkamen, schritten die Lokalbeamten ein. In einer Voruntersuchung wurden die meisten Katechisten als Unruhestifter verhaftet und die katholische Mission wurde der Indiskretion beschuldigt. In den eigentlichen Prozessen aber wurden die meisten Verhafteten freigesprochen, und jener Beamte, der uns der Indiskretion beschuldigt hatte, wurde wegen dieses Ausdrucks vom Gouverneur getadelt. Aber die Lokalbeamten blieben uns gerade deswegen umso übler gesinnt, und den Schaden davon hatten natürlich unsere Christen und Neophyten in den jetzt erst recht überhand nehmenden Prozessen“. Ibidem, p. 11.

²⁴ „Und die Folge von all diesem? Eine Abkehr vieler vom Christentum und seinen Vertretern. Was konnte man auch von diesen ungenügend unterrichteten Neophyten anders erwarten? Sie hatten sich ja hauptsächlich nur deshalb als Christen gemeldet, um Schutz und Hilfe in ihren Prozessen zu erhalten. So schlug nun plötzlich die so hoffnungsvoll begonnene Bewegung in das Gegenteil um, und es fielen die meisten wieder von der Mission ab. Unter diesem Rückschlag litten wir alle seelisch schwer, aber P. Lievens am allermeisten. Seine Gesundheit war durch Überarbeit und Fieber ganz zerrüttet. Im August wurde er nach Belgien gesandt, um einen letzten Rettungsversuch zu machen, aber es war zu spät. Er starb kurz nach seiner Ankunft in Belgien. Damals wussten wir selber nicht mehr, ob wir dreißig-, zwanzig-, zehntausend Christen oder weniger hatten. Die früher unsere Anhänger waren, verhielten sich uns gegenüber nicht nur gleichgültig, sondern misstrauisch und ablehnend“. Ibidem, p. 12.

mission [...] and gathered 6000 armed Mundas around him [...] One day there came three young people [...] and asked me [...] leave for Ranchi because at the coming night the riot would break out and that I should be killed first [...]. Then they would move on and kill all whites and Hindus alike [...]. But [...] the British police attacked all the gathered leaders at midnight and carried the trapped prophet away on an elephant"²⁵.

2.7. John Hoffmann as a missionary and defender of the Adivasi people

How serious Hoffmann has taken his commitment for the indigenous people of India, is shown by the fact that he had already five years to study their language before he could live among the Mundas, observing their customs and especially their legal systems systematically. Hoffmann himself writes about this the following:

"It cannot be stressed enough of what importance it is, especially among primitive peoples, to have a command of their language. It is an absolutely necessary key to gain their trust and get to know all their religious and social customs"²⁶.

From 1893 to 1907 Hoffmann spent fourteen years among the Munda people and the Oraon's who lived in the same area. Since 1893 he lived on the mission station in Bandgaon and since 1895 in Sarwada

²⁵ „Bald erfuhren wir, dass die Patrioten-Liga überall stark gegen uns wie gegen alle Europäer hetzte, und dass sich ein fähiger, junger Lutheraner mit etwas Schulbildung, namens Birsa, zum Propheten und Retter der Mundas aufwarf. Er schuf eine neue Religion, wirkte «Wunder», versammelte Jünger um sich, und aus dem ganzen Lande kamen unzählige Pilger zu ihm. In einem Gebirgsdorf, drei Stunden von meiner Missionsstation, ließ er sich nieder. Dort hatte er bereits 6000 bewaffnete Mundas um sich versammelt, und eines schönen Tages kamen drei junge Leute, die noch nicht regelrecht abgefallen waren, und baten mich dringend, sofort nach Ranchi abzureisen in der kommenden Nacht werde der Aufstand ausbrechen und ich solle als der nächste Europäer zuerst ermordet werden. Dann würde man weiterziehen und alle Weißen und Hindus totschiessen... Doch es kam leider anders. Ein englischer Polizeisuperintendent überfiel um Mitternacht mit seinen Leuten die versammelten Anführer und ließ den Propheten auf einem Elefanten gefangen fortführen“. Ibidem, p. 12-13.

²⁶ „Es kann nicht genug betont werden, von welcher Wichtigkeit es ist, besonders unter Naturvölkern, ihre Sprache zu beherrschen. Sie ist der absolut notwendige Schlüssel, ihr Vertrauen zu gewinnen und alle ihre religiösen und sozialen Gebräuche kennen zu lernen“. Ibidem, p. 15.

in the mountainous southeast of the Ranchi district. Twice he was the victim of the rebellious natives. Missionary work in the strict sense was unthinkable in those years of unrest and riots among the Mundas and throughout Chotanagpur. He used this time for the study of language and culture of those people, especially the legal system of the Mundas. Hoffmann, who in addition to his Moselle-Franconian dialect of the Eifel spoke German, French, Dutch-Flemish, English, Latin, Classical Greek, Bengali and even Hindi, spared no effort to penetrate deeper into the Munda language.

“Now I could benefit from the following circumstances: Firstly, my full command of the English language (I was already 12 years in India); then secondly, all the trouble I underwent to learn the Munda language and that from the moment when P. Lievens began his activity, so another 5 years earlier, before I came to the mission, I could already speak the language, when I arrived, and in a short time I was quite familiar with the language”²⁷.

In 1903 Hoffmann could finally release his Munda language grammar in the government publications. This brought him recognition and prestige among government officials. It helped to improve the relationship of the mission to the government agencies. At the height of the crisis a British official asked Father Hoffmann for advice in the seemingly intractable conflict between the tribal people and the Hindu society with its typical caste system.

“The repeated uprisings became the starting point of a new mission bloom” says Hoffmann and then explained how it came to the crucial turnaround: “If it comes to unrest in an Indian state, then the local officials receive a lot of admonition and blame from the Viceroy and the Governor, because they are responsible for that. In his distress the commissioner, the highest of the local officials, now turned to me with the question, why those wild Mundas would not come to rest. He turned to me because I was stationed at beginning of the wooded area where the riots

²⁷ „Jetzt kamen mir folgende Umstände zugute: Erstens meine vollkommene Beherrschung der englischen Sprache (war ich doch bereits 12 Jahre in Indien); dann zweitens all die Mühe, die ich mir gegeben, die Munda-Sprache zu erlernen und zwar von dem Augenblicke an, als P. Lievens seine Tätigkeit begann, also noch 5 Jahre früher, ehe ich zur Mission kam, ich konnte somit bereits sprechen, als ich hinkam, und in kurzer Zeit war mir die Sprache ganz geläufig“. Ibidem, p. 14.

were planned and prepared, and because I had not run away, nor had asked him for military protection, as the local Lutheran and Anglican missionaries had done"²⁸.

Hoffmann's fearless attitude reveals much of its exceptional stability and his righteous character. "I had already worked myself deeply into the world of thought and mentality of the Mundas when I was approached by the Commissioner with the above-mentioned question"²⁹.

Especially since his friend Lievens had begged him to reconcile the heavily misunderstood commitment of the missionaries for the Adivasi's with local officials. For Hoffmann the right moment to do that had just come.

"In oral and written statements I soon succeeded in convincing the gentlemen that not the Mundas, but the methods of government had caused those riots, namely that the simple transfer of laws that were based on the Hindu or Aryan social ground, had created confusion and resulted in injustice, which simply had destroyed the whole ancient land and legal system of that original people"³⁰.

With great respect for the attitude of the British, Hoffmann describes what happened next:

²⁸ „Die wiederholten Aufstände wurden zum Ausgangspunkt einer neuen Missionsblüte“ erklärt Hoffmann und erläutert dann wie es zu der entscheidenden Kehrtwendung kam: „Wenn es in einer indische Provinz zu Unruhen kommt, so hagelt es nur so Verweise und Tadelsergüsse von dem Vizekönig und dem Gouverneur auf die Lokalbeamten, weil die verantwortlich sind. In seiner Bedrängnis wandte sich nun der «Commissioner» (der höchste Lokalbeamte) an mich mit der Frage, weshalb denn diese wilden Mundas nicht zur Ruhe kämen. Er wandte sich an mich, weil ich gerade an der waldigen Ecke stationiert war, wo die Aufstände geplant und vorbereitet wurden, und weil ich weder fortgelaufen war, noch ihn um militärischen Schutz gebeten hatte, wie das die dortigen lutherischen und anglikanischen Missionare getan hatten“. Ibidem, p. 14-15.

²⁹ „Ich hatte mich bereits tief in die Gedanken- und Gemütswelt der Mundas eingearbeitet, als der Commissioner mit der oben erwähnten Frage an mich herantrat“. Ibidem, p. 15-16.

³⁰ „In mündlichen und schriftlichen Darlegungen gelang es mir bald, die Herren zu überzeugen, dass nicht die Mundas, sondern die Regierungsmethoden Schuld an diesen Unruhen seien, dass nämlich die einfache Übertragung von Gesetzen, die auf dem Hindu- oder arisch-sozialen Boden fußen, die größten Verwirrungen und Ungerechtigkeiten zur Folge haben mussten, und das ganze uralte Land- und Rechtssystem dieses Urvolkes einfach zertrümmerte“. Ibidem, p. 16.

“Now the English did something that only the clear - and far-sighted English could do: they took the advice of the missionary, so to speak, completely. Within a few years, all laws were revised, and each revision was presented to me for review, although I was German, plus a Jesuit. I was invited by the Governor, to prepare a law which includes the inheritance law, the land systems and rights of Indigenous Peoples of Chota Nagpur, in short, everything has been done, what I counselled for the benefit of the indigenous people”³¹.

At the insistence of Hoffmann, the government ordered the “surveying of the land that gave a written documented claim to every individual of all his fields and so the eternal uncertainty was put to an end”³². Almost all of his suggestions were included in the amendment in 1908, the so-called *Land tenancy Act of 1908*.

The health forces of the now 50-year-old missionary were so weakened in his thirty years in India that he had to go in 1907 to Germany. Fr Hoffmann used this time to prepare another large project for the natives of Chotanagpur. Land rights and thus their cultural identity and survival were secured by the land tenancy act of 1908 prepared by Fr Hoffmann. But small farmers threatened by poor harvests regularly made debts. They had to borrow from the Hindu moneylenders credits for usually 75%, but not infrequently up to 200% interest. This drove many indigenous farmers into economic ruin and forced them to pledge their fields. In order to pay such interest tens of thousands were forced to go as cheap day labourers into the tea plantations of Darjeeling. Not all missionaries had the foresight to recognize the need to take action here. Hoffmann was often criticized by his fellow-missionaries who wanted to give priority to strict evangelization. For him, both things belonged together: the defence of human rights and the proclamation of the Gospel. Struggle for survival of the indigenous required

³¹ „Da taten die Engländer, was unter den Europäern nur die klar- und weit-sichtigen Engländer fertig bringen: sie befolgten den Rat des Missionars sozusagen restlos. Im Laufe von einigen Jahren wurden alle Gesetze revidiert, und jede Revision wurde mir zur Begutachtung vorgelegt, obschon ich Deutscher und dazu noch Jesuit war. Ich wurde vom Gouverneur eingeladen, Erbrecht, Landsystem und Rechte der Urvölker von Chota-Nagpur gesetzlich festzulegen, kurz und gut, alles wurde getan, was ich zum Wohle der Urbevölkerung anriet“. Ibidem, p. 16.

³² Auf Drängen Hoffmanns veranlasste die Regierung noch die „Vermessung des Landes, die jedem einzelnen einen schriftlichen niedergelegten Anspruch auf alle seine Felder gab und so der ewigen Unsicherheit eine Ende machte“. Ibidem, p. 17.

first of all ensuring their bare existence and cultural identity. Only then could they be made open for evangelization.

2.8. The social reformer and educator of the people

The remaining land of the natives was no longer enough to feed them, and they had virtually no cash. Hoffmann was familiar with this problem from his home in Germany. Father Hoffmann knew even the answer Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen (1818-1888) had developed in Rhineland. Then Hoffmann developed a kind of Raiffeisen credit union, which he adapted to the needs of the indigenous farmers. His Jesuit superiors conferred on him the whole social and development work of the Ranchi mission. The Chotanagpur Catholic Co-operative Credit Society was founded in 1909. It was a great success.

“The whole institution may well be called «a people’s bank» in the best sense of the word, because everything in it belongs to the people and brings benefits to the people. Even the administrative costs flow back to the people, because only Catholic Mundas and Oraons may be employed there as civil servants”³³.

All this was endangered by the widespread drunkenness among men.

“At the same time, I took a veritable campaign against drunkenness [...] When I began to preach my mortgage system and my temperance association [...] I was assured by my confreres [...] and government officials [...] that these two things would find no acceptance at these savages”³⁴.

Hoffmann succeeded to curb the drinking habits of men for the benefit of their families and communities. He believed in the young generation. “I passed by the old men and immediately turned to the

³³ „Die ganze Einrichtung darf wohl im besten Sinn des Wortes eine Volksbank genannt werden, weil in ihr alles dem Volke angehört und dem Volke Nutzen bringt. Sogar die Verwaltungskosten fließen in das Volk zurück, weil nur katholische Mundas und Oraons als Beamte angestellt werden dürfen“. Ibidem, p. 32.

³⁴ „Zur selben Zeit unternahm ich einen regelrechten Feldzug gegen die Trunksucht, die umso schlimmer wirkte, weil der Verkauf von Branntwein von den Engländern als Erwerbsquelle benutzt wurde... Als ich mit obrigkeitlicher Erlaubnis mein Darlehenssystem und meinen Temperenzverein zu predigen anfang, wurde mir von allen Seiten, von meinen Mitbrüdern wie Regierungsbeamten, bald mitleidig, bald lächelnd versichert, dass gerade diese zwei Artikel bei diesen Wilden gar keinen Absatz finden würden“. Ibidem, p. 18.

youth, walking from one village to another, and in two years, both items had developed very well so that all wondered about it"³⁵. Fr Hoffmann introduced also Co-operative stores for the natives "to supplement the bank in pursuance of the scheme for improving the condition of the Tribals of Chota Nagpur"³⁶ since that was also a part of the Raiffeisen Bank model he had transferred to India. But tribal society had never managed to run stores.

"The bank or *Chota Nagpur Catholic Co-operative Credit Society* was only the first and the less important part of the whole scheme. It's most important and by far most necessary part of the scheme were the Co-operative Stores because they provided additional income; they were in fact, the only new source of revenue immediately accessible to the Tribals"³⁷.

Unfortunately, Hoffmann had not enough time to make them viable and to train the natives sufficiently for being able to run those stores effectively. He was convinced that social and human promotion is based on education. "Whenever he had an occasion to speak to the people, he did not fail to point out to the importance and necessity of education. In April, 1912 at the general meeting of the bank staff he told the delegates that those who did not send their children to school were going against their own race and country"³⁸.

2.9. Tireless worker and passionate researcher

The First World War (1914-1918) had a devastating impact, particularly on the overseas missions. No German missionary was allowed to remain in a British colony. The expulsion of Fr Hoffmann in November 1915 was unusual. The Governor of Bengal sent his private secretary aboard the ship to see if Father Hoffmann lacked anything. Although he was only a missionary, plus a Jesuit and German, Fr John Hoffmann was met on the part of the British colonial government

³⁵ „Ich ließ die Alten an der Seite liegen und appellierte unmittelbar an die Jugend von Dorf zu Dorf, und in 2 Jahren waren mir beide Sachen so sehr gelungen, daß sich alle darüber wunderten“. Ibidem, p. 18.

³⁶ P. Tete, *A Missionary Social Worker...*, op. cit., p. 119.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 119-121. Fr. Tete explains why those Co-operative stores were hard to manage by the natives: They were "entirely new to the Tribals, whom Hoffmann had to train as apprentices. Besides the newness of the Co-operative Stores, the people were unfit to run them at a profit. They were not shrewd enough to manage it as their rivals, the local merchants, were" (p. 121).

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 119.

with the highest respect and even appreciation and gratitude. However, after 37 years of missionary life he had actually never got over it. He had been able to bring to Europe all the ethnographic and linguistic research material he had collected or written in India. His remaining 13 years were marked by rheumatism.

The preparation of this material for publication exhausted him completely. In 1920, Father Arthur van Emelen SJ, a Flemish confrere and co-missionary from Chotanagpur, was made his co-editor of the *Encyclopaedia Mundarica*. Two volumes still appeared before his death; the other volumes were published between 1930 and 1935. A reprint appeared in 1976 and a few years ago a 16th volume of this greatest monument of Munda culture, the *Encyclopedia mundarica*, was published.

From 1916 to 1919 Hoffmann lived with the German Jesuits in Valkenburg and Exaten in the Netherlands. From 1919 till 1927 he was part of the Jesuit community in Dortmund, Germany, and eventually he spent his last years in Essen. He died on November 18, 1928 in the Hospital in Trier. Constantine Lievens and John Baptist Hoffmann are the founders of the local church for the indigenous population in Chotanagpur.

2.10. What can Contextual-Practical Theology Contribute?

What the missionaries had done over a century ago, is continued by the theologians of the churches in India today. The Christian communities must be guided by updated theological reflection. "Even after sixty years of our Independence there is wide-spread deprivation and active «marginalization» of a vast majority of people in our society"³⁹. An Indian Practical theologian writes in his recent article *Practical Theology for the Marginalised: Pastoral Care as a Point of Reference*: "Discourses focusing on the plight of the marginalized are taking place and thus have indeed become one of the major pre-occupations for the Church and theology as well"⁴⁰.

What remains the function of an adequate practical theology for the Christian communities?

"Theology ought to deal with the ultimate and impeding issues of life and death; especially about those who have been despised are degraded. Therefore, practical theology entails ex-

³⁹ J. Mohan Razu, *Practical Theology for the Marginalised: Pastoral Care as a Point of Reference*, "Indian Journal of Christian Studies", Vol. 3, no 1, 2013, p. 48.

⁴⁰ Ibidem, p. 47.

periences and aspirations of those who suffer and have a suffering experience in their day-to-day existence. It should be rooted in the past, rely on the present and move ahead believing in the redemptive power of the future"⁴¹.

Indian theologians and Christian communities are aware of their task to respond to the challenges they are confronted with, in the light of the Gospel. Therefore, praxis-oriented theology and reflection process starts from a commitment to create a just, sustainable and inclusive society and we must strive to make it more meaningful, humane and universal... Thus, a praxis-based and oppressed-oriented theology becomes a liberating and prophetic force which tends to contribute to the holistic understanding of the Kingdom of God taking place in our actions "here and now". This paradigm will free theology from all forms of idealism or utopia. This is what Jesus did in His life and witness⁴².

Becker was convinced that "there is a certain democratic spirit pervading the whole organization of the tribal life and action". And he saw a big advantage in their caste-free society, "to create", in the words of the just quoted Indian theologian, "a just, sustainable, egalitarian and inclusive society". If that is true, the tribal communities offer a lot to modern India as civilization with can incorporate many ethnic and religious communities.

John Hoffmann is even more relevant with his commitment to understand the cultural heritage of the tribal societies in Chotanagpur and to work tirelessly to create a more just society in Chotanagpur. His work has not lost anything of its relevance and it has to be continued by nowadays Christian communities and their leaders and theologians.

Conclusion

Long before the Second Vatican Council missionaries showed both understanding of and respect for the cultures of the peoples they were encountering. They knew that only by understanding the people they could communicate the Good News in a comprehensible and meaningful way.

This paper showed the important contribution of missionaries for the understanding of indigenous cultures in India. Today, the tribes are facing a lot of problems. A deeper understanding of the tribal life will help in their developmental process. It is hoped that my paper may throw some light towards this process.

⁴¹ Ibidem, p. 54.

⁴² Ibidem, p. 57.

At the end I would like to quote Pope address in 2014 to immigrants and refugees for all members of communities who are marginalized in human society. "They are an occasion that Providence gives us to help build a more just society, a more perfect democracy, a more united country, a more fraternal world and a more open and evangelical Christian community"⁴³.

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PAUL B. STEFFEN SVD

**Dimensions of Indian Civilization – Outsiders' part in it
Christopher Becker SDS and John B. Hoffmann SJ
and their contribution to promote indigenous communities in India**

Abstract

This article focuses on the outsiders' contribution to the strengthening of the Indian civilisation in its ethnic richness and variety. In this respect the life contribution of two German missionaries is described in more detail – Fr Christopher Becker SDS, who served as the Apostolic Prefect of the Catholic Mission of German Salvatorian missionaries in Assam from 1905 to 1915, and the work and struggles of Fr John Baptist Hoffmann SJ to secure the land title, livelihood and cultural heritage of the tribes in the Jesuit mission in Chotanagpur from 1893 to 1915, the year in which all German missionaries were expelled from British India.

Christopher Becker SDS was highly learned in the cultural anthropology, linguistics, geography and botany of India, especially its northeastern regions. His work *The Catholic Church in Northeast India 1890-1915* is an invaluable source of information on the history and culture of the native people of Assam. It demonstrates the positive role of the Catholic missionaries as promoters of education and protectors of the rich cultural heritage of the northeastern Indian indigenous population.

John Baptist Hoffmann SJ was one of the most outstanding missionaries and defenders of the cultural heritage of the tribal societies in Chotanagpur in Eastern India. He worked tirelessly for a more just society through provision of better education and reform of oppressive

⁴³ *Message of Pope Francis for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees (2014). Migrants and Refugees: Towards a Better World*, see http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20130805_world-migrants-day.html [accessed: 11.02.2015].

local customs among the indigenous Munda (Adivasi) people in Chotanagpur. He was also a notable researcher on the ethnography and linguistics. His monumental, 16 volumes *Encyclopaedia Mundarica* contains the accumulated knowledge on the whole culture and civilisation of the Munda people.

Keywords: Christopher Becker SDS, Constantin Lievens SJ, cultures of India, evangelisation of India, John Baptista Hoffmann SJ, mission in Assam, Munda (Adivasi) people.

PAUL B. STEFFEN SVD

**Przybycze wobec różnorodności indyjskiej cywilizacji.
Christopher Becker SDS oraz John B. Hoffmann SJ
i ich wkład w promowanie lokalnych społeczności w Indiach**

Streszczenie

Tematem artykułu jest wkład obcokrajowców w ratowanie etnicznego bogactwa i różnorodności indyjskiej kultury, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem dorobku ks. Christophera Beckera, prefekta apostolskiego Misji Katolickiej niemieckich salwatorianów w Assam w okresie 1905-1915, oraz jezuita Johna Baptysty Hoffmanna, walczącego o zachowanie prawa do ziemi, dobytku i dziedzictwa kulturowego ludności zamieszkującej tereny misji jezuickiej w Chotanagpur od 1893 roku aż do wygnania wszystkich niemieckich misjonarzy z Indii Brytyjskich w 1915 roku.

Christopher Becker SDS należał do grona najlepszych ekspertów w takich dziedzinach, jak antropologia kulturowa, językoznawstwo, geografia i botanika subkontynentu indyjskiego, zwłaszcza północnowschodnich regionów. Jego wiedza o systemach społecznych i praktykach religijnych w Indiach, uzyskana na drodze wieloletniego, osobistego doświadczenia, skłoniła go do zaangażowania się na rzecz promowania edukacji i opieki medycznej wśród miejscowej ludności. Becker był również znakomitym historykiem. Jego dzieło *The Catholic Church in Northeast India 1890-1915 (Kościół katolicki w północnowschodnich Indiach w latach 1890-1915)* jest nadzwyczaj cennym źródłem informacji o historii i kulturze plemion w Assam, wskazującym jednoznacznie na pozytywną rolę misjonarzy katolickich jako promotorów edukacji wśród rodowitych mieszkańców Indii, a także obrońców ich bogatego dziedzictwa kulturowego.

John Baptist Hoffmann SJ był jednym z najwybitniejszych misjonarzy i obrońców dziedzictwa kulturowego plemion zamieszkujących

region Chotanagpur w Indiach Wschodnich. Nie ustawał w wysiłkach zmierzających do budowania bardziej sprawiedliwego społeczeństwa poprzez zapewnienie lepszej edukacji i reformę represyjnych lokalnych obyczajów panujących wśród miejscowej ludności Munda (Adivasi) w Chotanagpur. Hoffmann był również znaczącym etnografem oraz lingwistą. Jego monumentalne, 16-tomowe dzieło *Encyclopaedia Mundarica* zawiera całą zebraną wiedzę na temat kultury i cywilizacji ludu Munda.

Słowa kluczowe: Christopher Becker SDS, Constantin Lievens SJ, kultury Indii, ewangelizacja Indii, John Baptista Hoffmann SJ, misje w Assam, ludy Munda (Adivasi).