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Revival, Syncretism, and the anti-colonial discourse in the Kherwar Movement 1871-1910

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Syncretism has for a long time been a problematic term in the history of religion. This is due to the fact that the terms present meaning of mingling of religious traditions definitely connotes negative associations; and one may be tempted to do away with the term for scholarly use. On the other hand it is practical with a term, which opens for analysis of how religious traditions influence each other. In order to do that it is necessary to state how and when the term got its present negative connotations, their essentialist background, and to what degree it is possible to move from an analysis of mutual influence of religious traditions to an analysis of power hegemony.

The Greek noun *synkretismós* which must have meant something like mixing together is first found by Plutarch (AD 45-125) who made a pun out of it when he stated that love among brothers involved that they should help each others against foes, “imitating in this point, at least, the practice of the Cretans, who, though they often quarrelled with and warred against each other, made up their differences and united when outside enemies attacked; and this it was which they called “syncretism”.” (*Moralia* 490b) (Helmbold’s translation quoted from Shaw and Stewart 1994, 3). Definitely a positive meaning which was also common when the word reappeared among European Renaissance scholars like Erasmus of Rotherdam (1469-1536) who saw the classical non-Christian philosophers as an achievement which strengthened Christianity. The negative connotations of the term syncretism originated during the 17th Century when other Protestant theologians refuted the Lutheran protestant George Calixtus’ (1586-1656) attempt to re-establish the consensus in the early Christian church. A position which in his time was hailed as well as

condemned as syncretism (formally condemned 1645), and since his position lost the concept of syncretism has carried a negative meaning in Church history as well as in common language¹.

Instead of engaging in whether syncretism is to be evaluated as a positive integrative event or a dissolution of the doctrines of a Christian church or another religious system, I shall turn the attention to how new elements are continuously reworked into wholes when integrated in a cultural or religious system. In this regard I follow some of the suggestions of specialists on syncretism in general (Ringgren 1969, 13) and of Christian missions to India. Among them Frykenberg has stressed that Christianity in India is the result of a long history of Indigenisation perhaps dating as far back as the early centuries of the Christian era (Frykenberg 2002). Such long term changes in religions has been described by Richard M. Eaton in his analysis of the rise of Islam in Bengal over half a millennium from 1204 to 1760. He argues for the existence of three distinct aspects of the process,

each referring to a different relationship between Islamic and Indian superhuman agencies. One of these I am calling *inclusion*; a second, *identification*; and a third, *displacement*. By *inclusion* is meant the process by which Islamic superhuman agencies became accepted in local Bengali cosmologies alongside local divinities already embedded therein. By *identification* is meant the process by which Islamic superhuman agencies ceased merely to coexist alongside Bengali agencies, but actually merged with them, and when the Arabic name Allah was used interchangeably with the Sanskrit Niranjan. And finally by *displacement* is meant the process by which the names of Islamic superhuman agencies replaced those of other divinities in local cosmologies. The three terms *inclusion*, *identification*, and *displacement* are of course only heuristic categories, proposed in an attempt to organize and grasp intellectually what was on the ground a very complex and fluid process.

(Eaton 1997, 269-270)

Eaton's three aspects of the process of religious change could easily be utilized on the process of Indigenisation of the Christian church in India, and his warning on the complex and fluid process shall alert us that even his two first aspects which could be taken as different aspects of syncretism may be divided into further aspects if one took a closer look at the processes. Nevertheless his

¹ This para mostly follows Shaw and Stewart 1994.

systematisation of one process of religious change is illuminating and important for any study of syncretism in India.

In the following analysis of syncretism the evidence is taken from the Kherwar movement, an anti-colonial movement among the Santals and low caste Hindus in the last part of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. A number of reasons make the Kherwars fit for an analysis of the limits and gains of the term syncretism. One of them is that it is possible to investigate the changes of the strictly political element in the movement over time. Another important reason is that the Kherwars appeared in a time of other religious mass movements and may be compared to contemporary mass conversions to Christianity and Hinduism in India. And the last point which make them so interesting for studies in syncretism is that they incorporated Hindu as well as Christian elements in their belief system. This was an introduction of a combination of “foreign” elements to Santal religion which has often been underestimated due to the fact that some of the early descriptions of the Kherwars were made by missionaries who were against the Kherwars in one way or the other. Either by fighting them as the well known specialist on the Kherwars Rev. Skrefsrud did during the 1870s and early 1880s (Hodne 1966, 265-287) or like his successor Rev. Bodding who underestimated the importance of the Christian elements in their teaching and made it disappear by assessing them as representing perverted forms of Christianity (in O’Malley 1910, 150).

Background

The first time the Santals are mentioned in history dates from British reports from the 1790s. At that time the Santals lived in the jungles covering the lower part of the Chota Nagpur Plateau.

They were depicted as a people without caste, and it was generally stated that Hindus of higher caste did not allow them to stay in their villages, but placed them between the village and the jungle. The reason that the Santals moved out of the jungle to stay among the Hindus was the agrarian policy of the East India Company. The Company acquired the function of collector of land rent - as Divani under the Moghul in Delhi - in major parts of Eastern India in 1765, and from the 1790s it initiated a change in the collection of land rent. The reform was called *The Permanent Settlement*, and it made the job of collectors of the land rent inheritable, and freezed the land rent at a not changeable amount of money. The reform was based on the rather naive idea that the *zamindars* (whom the Company subcommitted the collection of the land rent to) as soon as they knew that they could not be evicted from the soil would invest in it, and hereby lead to an increase

of the Company's revenue from other sources. But just to be sure of the immediate income the Company settled the land rent at an amount that was many times greater than any land rent from before the reform, and afterwards the land rent was increased at irregular intervals as well.

That meant that the zamindars had to bring virgin soil under cultivation and in the interior parts of the country they employed Santals. They were employed as a group under the leadership of a headman (*manjhi*) who negotiated the payment on behalf of all of them. The most common end was that the headman and the zamindar or more properly his sub collectors settled on a land rent which the headman had to collect from the rest of the group and settle on their behalf. After the Santals had cleared the jungle they laid out fields where they grew millet and in a minor degree paddy. From a formal point the Santals were allowed to grow the fields and they could claim the soil at a later point. But they were given no support for the first year, so they had to borrow on the soil or the crop to get through the long period from when they planted the first beds of paddy until they could harvest the first paddy some four or six months later. And moneylenders moved into the land as well. This bound the Santals by mortgage in a situation very much like slaves as the son inherited the mortgage of the father, but when construction work on a railway began in 1854 it seemed to improve the lot of the Santals as the wage work allowed them to pay their debts. But the moneylenders would not let them leave to earn money so that they could pay back their debts and this led to intensified conflicts between Santals and moneylenders as well as landlords. After the authorities had swept aside protests from the traditional headmen in 1854 an insurrection, the Santal *Hul* broke out in 1855. It started as attacks on the moneylenders and landlords and by burning down of their archives, but it soon developed from local protests to a regular insurrection, which in the end was severely crushed by army of the East India Company. On their escape many Santals moved further towards the East and settled in parts of the present West Bengal where there had not before been any Santal settlement.

At the local level, however, one could say, that the insurrection led to improvements for the Santals. A so-called *non-regulation district*, the Santal Parganas was created by the Act XXXVII of 1855. It covered parts of an old non-regulation area the Damin-I-Koh designated for tribals round Rajmahal, Pakur, Godda and Dumka. It was exempt from most of the Bengal laws and the Santals got the opportunity to take their cases directly to the British authorities without any local court in between. An improvement indeed as the local courts had often sided with the moneylenders and collectors. Moreover the headmen were given a formal position as they were nominated and paid by the Company that they could act as kind of local police authority arbitrator. Finally it was

prohibited to hand over farmland to non-tribals. That should prevent a development from mortgage of the land to slavery. Yet in 1867, the Bengal legal system was again applied, leading to widespread protest. Reforms were introduced again from 1871, but while they were intended to ameliorate the situation of the Santal cultivators by giving them full rights as ryots of the land, this imposition of the concept of private property probably accelerated alienation of their land to non-tribals.

New Bengal laws introduced after India became a Colony under the (British) Crown in 1858 were intended to protect the rights of the peasants and copyholders against the collectors and moneylenders. But those laws had only a minor impact, as the collectors successfully argued that *The Permanent Settlement* was based on the logic of land rent, and that it would become impossible to collect it, if they could not seize the land and bind the cultivators to it. That the agreements between the collectors and the Santals normally were informal and not based on written legal documents only added to the problems. That meant that Santals could be evicted from a well-defined farm they had cultivated for many years, just at the wish of the collector if he wished to increase the land rent.

Even if the development in Santal Parganas and the surrounding districts gradually came to follow the same lines it is important to keep the divisions in mind when one considers the Santals in the last part of the 19th century.

Religion as a denominator

As mentioned the high castes kept the Santals out of their villages but there are good reasons to doubt that “religion” in the sense of “religious community” was a denominator as such during most of the 19th century. This is strongly indicated by Rev. Bodding’s Santali Dictionary². The entry on the word *dhorom* which now can be used to designate a religious community could probably not been used in that sense at that time. Besides the possible meaning of “religion” indicating a type of religion, but not a “religious community”, the meanings aggregate around religious observances, righteousness, and piety. When it comes to the meaning of “religion” the examples given often indicate that a more literate translation would be to “perform rituals towards some god”. For instance *Dibi sewa dhorom* means “a religion with worship of Durga”; *bonga sewa dhorom* means “a religion with worship of spirits” (ie. Bodding’s Christian flavoured translation of the bongas, that

² The collections underlying this dictionary were initiated by Rev. Skrefsrud’s in 1869 and continued by Rev. Bodding up to about 1930.

is the central deities among the Santals); and Christianity may be designated *kiristan dhorom* or *Isor sewa dhorom* ie. “a worship of God religion” (Bodding 1934: II, 183-184).

In Bodding’s time, as today, there is no common denominator for Hindus and Hinduism in Santali. High caste Hindus are termed *deko*, and they may be termed Hindu cats (*deko pusi*) due to the fact that they are so fond of milk and fish. But perhaps also due to the fact that they are seen as devious as stated in the proverb, “You may deceive a Santal, but never a Hindu cat” (Bodding 1934: II, 69). Besides *deko* is as much a term for a Bengali as a Hindu, and low-caste Hindus are not included by the term. Bodding’s examples of not included Hindu castes are Doms, Bauris, and Hadis, but the term is still not fixed in this regard.

When present day Santals distinguish between Hindus, including low caste Hindus, and Christians which may be Santals or belong to any specified caste, they tend to turn to an Anglicized vocabulary which bears evidence to the fact that it is a product of the big classificatory endeavour of the Census operations since 1871. Here the colonial Government of India tried to account for its inhabitants in accordance with the scientific vocabulary of those days. For our present theme it is evident that H.H. Risley faced great difficulties in fitting the religions of the different castes and tribes into mutually exclusive categories when he published *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* in 1891 in accordance with the systematic rules set up by a conference on the Ethnography of Northern India 16 years earlier (Risley 1891/1981, II: Appendix II). In his article on the Santals Risley stressed that Skrefsrud, who was one of his correspondents on Santal Parganas, identified the supreme deity of the Santals as Thakur. A position which Risley objected to as “I am myself inclined to doubt whether a god bearing the Hindu name Thakur, and exercising supreme powers which mark a comparatively late stage of theological development, can really have formed part of the original system of the Santals.” (Risley 1891/1981, II: 232).

Regarding groups that later anthropology have come to consider as low caste Hindus the classificatory situation in the late 19th century was not better. Risley was not in doubt that the above-mentioned Bauri were of non-Aryan descent and they “profess to be Hindus of the Sakta sect, but in Western Bengal, at any rate, their connexion with Hinduisim is of the slenderest kind ...”. They also sacrifice “fowls to Barpahari, which is merely another name for the “great mountain” (Maran Buru) of the Santals” (Risley, 1891/1981, I: 80).

It is evident that Risley struggled with the fact that he saw Hinduism proper as the essence of the Hinduism of the higher castes primary presented by the Brahmins as it is evident in his impressive article on the Brahmins of Bengal (Risley 1891/1981, I: 141-162). They are initially

described with the full historical references to the *Laws of Manu*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* and the actual Brahmins of his own present are diligently classified in accordance with different groups of decent, but the content of their religion and much of their religious practices are left to our imagination of the essence of the holy scriptures.

Historical sources for the Kherwars

The Kherwars existed as a distinct group with a large Santal element over a long period of time since the first Census in 1871 and well organised forms of the movement could still be found in collaboration with the independence movement in the 1930s and even if it is mostly assumed that the Jharkhand movement took over from the Kherwar movement since the 1930s and especially since Independence they were still reported as an existing group in 1966 (Olav Hodne 1966, 275), and the *Census of 1991* reports the presence of 2261 Kherwars among the Santals in Bihar. For the present argument which mostly considers the history of the movement until the first decennia of the 20th century it is important that the scholarly systematisation of the Kherwar movement and the teaching of the early Kherwar leaders were systematised by Rev. Bodding in his correspondence to L.S.S. O'Malley which the later included in the *District Gazetteer of Santal Parganas* published in 1910. Bodding also dealt with the later development of the movement in a paper of his own published in 1921. At a later point of time Aditya Prasad Jha (1960, 103-113) added important elements in his historical study based on the materials in the State Central Records Office in Bihar. Olav Hodne (1966, 265-287) has studied the relations between the Kherwars and one of the missionaries to Santal Parganas, Rev. L.O. Skrefsrud; and Joseph Troisi (1979) has described them on the background of other social movements among the Santals.

Besides these sources which look upon the Kherwars from different outsiders' points of view, one of the sources underlying Bodding's description of the Kherwars exists as well. It is a narrative of a Santal written down in Santali and kept in together with Bodding's collections of Santal folklore in the Oslo University Library. As this source enables us to get a Santal point of view on the Kherwars, it deserves some consideration. The narrator of "The Story of the Babajius" is most probably Bodding's main collector, Sagram Murmu or Baharur Sagram Murmu. He settled in Mohulpahari in Santal Parganas where Bodding was missionary in 1892 and continued to work for Bodding at least until 1927. But the present story can be dated more precisely, as Bodding quotes from it and rewrote parts of it into the anthropological vocabulary of his days it in his

correspondance to the District Gazetteer of 1910. A specific point is the way the babajis cured women from spirits.

Briefly, the woman confesses to having had sexual intercourse with a great number of *bongas* (in one case, it is said, the woman mentioned as many as 127 male *bongas*, each separately by name) during the confession the *babaji*, as a preliminary measure, draws figures on the ground, muttering *mantras*, spitting on the figures and wiping them out; after a night's preparation, he gives the woman a twig with which she draws figures on the ground according to his instructions, one to represent each of the *bongas* with whom she has lived; finally the *babaji* makes the woman break off her connexion with each *bonga*, and she repeats after him a long list of abusive epithets for each and every *bonga*, winding up with spitting and trampling on the figures.

(O'Malley 1919, 149)

This is really the narration of cures against bongas such as the Jogon Bonga called, "the big-bellied, the undersized with protuberant stomach, the stout and plumb like a taro root, the dirty one, the broad-footed, the deformed one, the nose-less, the one with sunken cheeks, the big-toothed (etc.)" (Paragraph 66). But it is possible to date the manuscript more specifically as one of the last events which is described is a visit of the narrator to a named guru on the date 28/1/1906.

If the narrator is really Sagram Murmu the story in itself throws some light on a case of personal syncretism as he had Christian leanings as can be seen from a letter he wrote to Bodding sometime around 1907 (J. Gausdal 1960, 9), but in his presentation of the Kherwars he still gives evidence of his respect for and belief in the powers of the leaders, Babajis.

The narration begins, "I am going to tell you the story of the babajis whom I have seen with my own eyes and about whom I have heard with my own ears" and he gives an extensive description of the first of them, Bhagrit babaji who appeared as a babaji in 1871 and the narrator seems to have continued to visit different babajis on his own behalf up to the time he wrote down the story. Whoever the narrator was, he saw clear parallels between the teaching of the Kherwars and that of the Christian church which he knew as a regular churchgoer as he stated that Bhagrit Manjhi, spoke "about the Ten Commandments about which we all hear daily in the church." (Paragraph 7).

In the following I will try to confront the well known outsiders' descriptions to the early history of the Kherwar movement and its implications with regard to syncretism with the statements in "The Story of the Babajis". My argument will be that there are to be found a number of instances of syncretism between Santal religion and culture and Hinduism as well as Christianity, but that the meaning of the variations in religion were dependant on a time specific political programme for the empowerment of the Santals.

The Kherwar movement

The word Kherwar is a term usually assumed to be derived from the designation of the Santals in their own language Santali, as it was reported to Rev. Skrefsrud by the Santal, Kolean guru in 1869 (Bodding 1942, 10 & 12). This may, however, be a result of the Kherwar movement as the term is not recorded anywhere before the this movement which can be dated to the Santal Bhagrit Manjhi's agitation up to the first Census which was conducted in 1871. He was then already a known political leader as he had been imprisoned in 1868 for his participation in agrarian unrest, but it was seemingly not before 1871 that he appeared as a baba or proper babaji which was the honorific title of the religious leaders in the Kherwar movement. He forwarded demands for Santal raj (self rule) and demanded that the Santal should return to worship the (Sun) god Chando or Rama and clean themselves from their sins instead of worshipping their traditional godheads, the Bongas, whom he considered as evil. After a famine in 1874 he expanded his teachings as well as the level of his political actions. A shrine build according to Hindu principles was constructed under his supervision and a Santal was appointed as panda (a priest) (A.P. Jha 1960, 198). Theologically, Bhagrit explained that the Hul had failed due to the fact that Santals had had intercourse with non-Santal women, and politically he had himself anointed as raja and started to levy land rent. He was then arrested together with his brothers and the panda. Bhagrit was sentenced to imprisonment for two years. In the district Sultanabad another leader, Gyan, ordered the Santals to cleanse themselves and stop paying rent to the government, for which he was sentenced to seven years of imprisonment. Nevertheless the Kherwar agitation continued in 1875 and from 1874 to 1877 there were extra troops stationed at Dumka, the main town of Santal Parganas. Bhagrit Manjhi died in 1879.

The Kherwar movement continued, however, and the preparations for the Census of 1881 led to new outbreaks. There was by then Kherwars many places in Santal Parganas, and a new

leader, the Hindu Dubia Gossain toured Santal Parganas before he settled in Hazaribagh District. He smoked ganja, smeared his body with ashes and let his hair grow, all in accordance with Hindu babajis. In Santal Parganas the house of the magistrate in Jamtara was burned down and prisoners were freed from in Khatikund and the magistrate was forced to cancel the Census operations (O. Hodne 1966, 272).

In retrospect it is difficult to know exactly which Kherwar groups that stood for what activities and what the relations between Santals and low castes were, but there is no doubt that 40.960 people registered themselves as Kherwars during the 1881 Census (O. Hodne 1966, 273). Even more telling is the fact that there were recorded 825.889 Santals at the Census in 1871, but only 202.752 in 1881. In some districts there were what could be considered a natural increase of the Santal population but in many other districts lots of Santals evidently recorded themselves as something else, or refused to be recorded at all. In Santal Parganas alone the change was from 455.513 in 1871 to 9.148 in 1881 (H.H. Risley 1891/1981, 234). These figures are serious indicators of social unrest and extra troops were stationed in Dumka 1881-1882.

As stated the Kherwar movement continued in different forms and there are great differences in the estimation of it as a political or a religious movement. There is little doubt that many administrators and missionaries estimated the early phase of the Kherwar movement in the the 1870s and early 1880s as a dangerous political movement. This is stated in administrative reports, and letters from the Missionaires to the authorities and the newspapers.

In 1874 the Kherwars were strongly opposing the Christian missions and the CMS missionary Rev. A Stark stressed that the Government should found Christian schools to fight the opposition (A.P. Jha 1960, 108-109) and in the autumn 1880 Rev. Skrefsrud observed that the Kherwars propagated “a rabid, socialistic, political agitation, the religion being only a means towards an end” (Skrefsrud 1880). When one considers the situation of the Census operations at that time it is understandable that he considered the movement as political. Other observers had, however, allready pointed to the fact that parts of the movement had turned its focus towards more mild aspects of religious life. In the Administration Report of Bhagalpur Division for 1877-78 it is stated that,

He (Bhagirath) and his new sect, have been orderly and quiet; they have formed themselves into a separate community, they wont eat, drink or intermarry with the other Santals; they

call themselves Kherwars, and in their religious and domestic practices are more and more approximating to the Hindoos and may almost be regarded as belonging to that religion.

(Quoted from A.P. Jha 1960, 111)

As far as Hindu influences are concerned the Kherwars have often been seen as divided in three branches, Sapha Hor, Samra and Babaji (Troisi 1979, 135) out of which the Kherwars are usually seen as the original group which the others have split away from. The Kherwars have already been introduced. The Sapha Hor or Clean Santals, should be specially strict in regard to avoid eating together with non-Sapha Hor and to exclude them from ceremonies and life cycle events. It was also especially the Sapha Hor who kept away from eating fowls and pigs and drinking of rice-beer. Instead of doing what common Santals do they had to bathe in the morning before they could take any food (Troisi 1979, 135). The Samra's sacrifices consisted of sugar and sweetmeats and they met regularly on one evening a week (Roy Choudhury 1965, 935). Definitely a new practice which could be seen as a step towards parochial organisation of religious life.

In retrospect there is general agreement on the existence of these three groups and some of their characteristics among the scholars. It is, however, difficult to know when they originated, and whether they can be seen as the product of schisms in one movement or as different developments in an open network of religious leaders which Santals and non-Santals could attend according to their choice. Troisi (1979, 135) who follows a chronological frame as to when the different branches appeared stress that the division in the three branches took place after the Kherwar movement went underground after their activities in 1897. Hodne (1966, 278) stresses that the three different branches already had been described in 1880 by Rev. Skrefsrud who described them with some of the same characteristics as they were later known for. About 1906 Bodding's Santal informant used Kherwar as a designation for the people who joined the babajis (para 13, *vide infra*), but he named the story after the leaders, the babas.

In our context the most relevant question is how far they showed indicators of non-Santal religious influence and on that there is general agreement. The killing and the subsequent taboo against eating the meat of fowls and pigs is one indicator of Hindu influence. Others are the ritual practices, the names of the gods adored, and the institution itself, which is usually considered as taken over from Hindu babajis.³

³ Of course this are kinds of low caste religion which Risley would rather consider as tribal than as Hinduism, but later researchers who have written after Hinduism had become a communal identity have not seen any problems in designating religious practices as being Hindu or non-Hindu.

It is seemingly only Rev. Boddington who have argued that “several of the babajis had been pervert Christians, and the first, Bhagrit, either had been a Christian or at any rate had been in a Christian school” (quoted from O’Malley 1910, 150, Boddington forwarded a like position in his own name 1921, 231).

This argument was strongly refuted by Hodne (1966, 281) who stressed that the CMS missionaries on whose field Bhagrit lived never mentioned any thing on Bhagrit’s connection with Christianity in their reports to the Government.

Instead Hodne inscribed the Kherwars in a general movement of the Santals towards Hinduism. A position which he argued from the general Census figures as the Kherwars had only been counted in 1881. In 1901 11 percent of the 663,000 Santals in Santal Parganas were returned as Hindus, a figure which in 1931 had grown to about 50 percent of the 754,004 Santals in Santal Parganas and 796,656 in Bengal . The Bihar Census of 1931 only recorded that the Santals “are being gradually ‘Hinduized’ and the further this process is carried, the more they are in danger of becoming identified with the depressed classes.” (Hodne 1966, 279).

Even if those figures in later periods have developed even further to the Hindu inclination, I will try to return to Boddington’s main source for his description of the early Kherwar movement and if it offers us some hints for Boddington’s observation of the Christian influences among the Kherwars and consider what it may mean for our understanding religious communities and syncretism in the late part of the 19th century.

The Kherwars in the Santal source

In “The Story of the Babajis” we meet Bhagrit Baba as a teacher of repentance in the time of the famine in 1874. The Burmese rice which the Government brought for relief is was, in the words of Bhagrit Baba, a gift from the past,

The rice the Europeans have brought now is the same which we gave in the olden days, it is the same which they bring back to us. It is the rice we offered during our worship by giving a handful of it, which they now bring back to us; it is meant for maintaining our life. Take this rice when you have done proper rituals, fowls and pigs shall not tread on it. And, prepare your food everyday after taking a bath in order they you do not make adultery; hold on to rituals and religious duties. Now, I have said everything to you, go and act accordingly. (Para 12)

When the people of the country returned [to their villages], they began to slaughter fowls and pigs; they said, “If there are hungry fowls, they will probably eat the rice.” Saying this, they killed and ate each one of the fowls, and they called themselves Kherwars. (Para 13)

The reason for the demand for repentance was that God, the Sun God Cando, had wanted to give the Santals the country in the time of the Hul, but that the leaders Sido and Kanhu had not been able to,

carry out their office. They could not control their greed and began to snatch away daughters and daughters-in-law of others. They did unjust acts in the eyes of Cando, and therefore, he in turn did not give the country to them; And, as he did not approve of their misdeeds, they could not win their fight. (Para 11)

But now, when the Santals took repentance in 1874,

The Europeans are trembling in fear, they bring the rice and deliver it to us and they will shortly run away, it is because of this reason that they have made [roads and railways] for themselves like the tracks and passages of the field rats. They know it very well that one day the “black” sons of this land will get the country, they know it definitely. (Para 11)

The known story of the arrest of Bhagrit Baba comes later, and even if it is more set in the frame of fraud than that of political demands (Para 15) the modern reader is not in doubt that he lost his case, but the narrator describes him and the some further 18 specified and a number of unspecified leaders all through the country as convincing men of God, and perhaps as victorious. The implicit reason is that they all had the power to heal, and that they predicted that the effect of their acts would vanish after three (Para 19) or five years (Para 30) when they would also die, which the narrator states that they did. This seems to have convinced the narrator who on his own behalf had continued to visit the various babajis when they came forward even if he from some point of time, must have attended the Christian church as well. In this regard his evidence on the Kherwars preaching of repentance becomes important, because he seemingly saw it as just another formulation of the Christian message of repentance.

According to the narrator the babajis claimed that it was God who had given them the power to heal, but that they could only contact God in prayer and act as intermediary between the ailing and God, but that healing was the decision of God, and depended on the repentance of the ailing.

Generally the babaji received visitors in the evening and promised to contact God during the night and in the morning he could tell them,

“Sirs, The Supreme Being descended at the middle of the night; did you hear or not what we were conversing together?” They answered: “Where! When! We did not hear the conversation.” He said to them: “Then sirs, maybe you did doze a little. Isn’t it?” They answered: “Yes, maybe we slept right away.” (Para 6)

In the story of Pero guru who healed the sick, could single out witches and celebrated Karam, one of the famous social rituals in Santal society, the guru stressed that the powers were not his, but only belonged to God,

“Sirs, my folks, you say: “If we go to Pero guru, then he will heal us.” “But, my folks, I say to you: “I do not heal, it is the Cando who heals; have faith on him, and he will heal you. He has given me a blessing in order to tell you these words. ...” (Para 19)

As it has been stated the Ten Commandments were stressed by the babajis, and even if it is difficult, nay impossible, to recognise the Commandments as they are listed in the Bible, the context often indicates a general moral pretext which has a Christian mark. The babaji known as Bariar guru taught that the things forbidden to eat were “these that we hear about in the Ten Commandments” (Para 30). But when he continues to give rules for what dances that are allowed to dance he introduces new rules as to whom who are allowed to touch each other and stress that adultery is forbidden. (Para 30). This is necessary due to the fact that “Cando is (...) throwing against us all the sorrows because he is angry with us” – A moral God indeed, and a moral which had not been part of the traditional rules of the Santals. Here adultery was forbidden by God indeed, but he never became angry and send sorrows on the Santals because of it.

Christian or Hindu influence on Santal religion

Bodding's narrator of the "Story on the Babajis" was situated in Santal Parganas, and most of those placenames which can be recognised are in the surroundings of Dumka, and his informations are in many regards limited to that area. For instance Dubia Gosain is not mentioned at all, neither are the temples set up and their pandits, not even the one which is known in connection with Bhagrit baba. When the narrator stressed the Christian elements one may of course doubt if it is because he made what could be termed an *interpretatio Christiana*; but I think Bodding is right in considering the narration on the repentance and the Ten Commandments reflects historical fact; but it is his own theology which leads to the term "perverted Christians". In this regard he was a missionary of his own time with his specific Lutheran approach to Christianity. In retrospect it is more fruitful to see the Kherwars as one of many modernising movements in the colonial period, and in this regard they are drawing on much the same lines as the missionaries. The preaching of moral is one of them, and the glorification of God as the one who allow healing when people do repentance is another.

In retrospect the Santals Christian missions and the Kherwars were different ways into modernity, both ways intended to reform the Santal community, and both had to come to grips with traditional elements in the Santal culture and religion as well as with each other and the introduction of new traits in contemporary Hindu culture, which was by then gradually being turned into a carrier of community as the identity of Christians, Kherwars and Santals themselves.

Conclusion

One might ask oneself if this was syncretism? Yes, it was, though not syncretism in a way which destroyed the society, but inclusion of new gods and ideas accompanied by new forms of belief suitable for the social changes Santal society underwent at that time. At the end of the 19th century the social changes were new forms of rent and agrarian exploitation of farmers, copyholders and workers, and the response was mass movements which combined demands for social reconstruction with stress on individual repentance. In this way the Kherwars and the Christian missions agreed on the answer with only a disagreement as to the name of God. For the missionaries this was a serious disagreement, but for the Santals demand for repentance might have been more important. For the narrator of the "Story of the Babajis" it was evidently the common denominator which he might have deemed as more important than the name of the God, as documented by the fact that he visited the babajis also after he had started to frequent the Christian church.

It will be possible to make an argument as to whether the Kherwars represent forms of inclusion, identification or displacement of elements of Santal religion with non-Santal religion, Hindu or Christian, but I think that the important lesson from the story is that the names of the Gods and the religion is of minor importance to religious message. A religious message fitting to the time and the social situation of individuals has appeal to them and they may listen to the message and accept the gods in accordance with the importance of the message.

That the Kherwars has been on the decline at least since the 1930s is evidence that new forms of religious and political organisations have taken over. The Jharkhand movement is only one of them, and the political and religious excitement in present Santal society is evidence that a new social situation has appeared and that the Santals are in search for fitting answers within the modern Indian society.

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