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A Bhil Mission: Pastoral Training And Christian Evangelization System Of Nomadic Bhil Of Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

Many fathers and sisters, both from Europe and South India, have dedicated their life for some decades work as *Dharm Pracharak* for the Bhil missions and are aware of the problems the *Bhil Adivasis* (Tribals). From cultural, historical, social and religious perspectives, and for this mission initiated. These mission operated by Pastoral Councils in dioceses, congregations, parishes, missions, institutions, associations and organisations. This mission turns into demographic change and separatism in Bhil Adivasis of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, so the urgent notice and be more aware of the magnitude of the present situation in the Bhil missions. The outcome would be to increasing Catholic Bhils pastorally, socially, economically, legally, politically and culturally. Even though much is being done in Bhopal, Sagar, Khandwa, Indore and other places to reach out positively, more remains to be done in these and other places. A lot more can be done with the human and material resources available to us today that useful to understand the mission. Conversion of the Bhils and other neighbouring tribes by pastoral and missiologicalis studied in this paper.

Key words: Bhil Mission, Bhil Adivasi, Catholic Bhil, Pastoral Council, *Dharm Pracharak*

1. Envisaging Nomadic Catechists for Nomadic Bhil Christians

In the past one century, a host of Bhil Catechists have contributed to the spread of the Gospel in association and under the guidance of Capuchins from France, Divine Word Missionaries (SVD) from Germany, Jesuits (SJ) from Spain, Salesians (SDB) from Italy (Taylor D, 2000). Many other diocesan priests and religious from South India have made a tremendous contribution and impact on the Bhil tribes by their tireless efforts for the growth of the Catholic Church in the states of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra. They have worked tirelessly for the propagation of Catholic faith in some of the prominent Bhil Missions such as in Thandla, Jhabua, Bhagor, Panchkui, Dungripada, Amalipada, Ambapada, Dang, Kushalgargh, Sirpur, Rishabhadev, Barwani, Umarpada, Zankvav, Sirpur, Bhiloda, Mohudi, Nanakantharia, etc[1].

These are some of the Bhil missions, to name a few, where Bhil catechists rendered their self-less service (*Mission seva*) by foot, cycles, both day and night, in all seasons of the year (*barah mas*) for "harvesting the soul". They could spread the Gospel through Bhil myths, legends, folktales, folksongs, proverbs, riddles and other forms of sayings of Bhili, their dear language with great zeal[2]. The old missionary congregations among the Bhils like Capuchins, Divine Word Missionaries (SVD), Jesuits (SJ) and Salesians (SDB) are spreading the gospel message via same folk song, some songs got international identity[3]. Today, Master Gabriel Damor stands as an example of Bhil nomadic or mobile catechists, to quote one example.

The evangelical work in terms of Gospel preaching promoted by the Bhil catechists could be resumed by priests and sisters more systematically, as to bear more evangelical fruits. To improve the pastoral situation of the Nomadic Catholic Bhils, the institution of catechist (*Dharam Pracharak*) needs to be studied well. The new Bhil Catechists (*Dharam Pracharak*) can promote further growth of Bhil missions, besides taking pastoral care of Nomadic Bhils. Today a new situation has emerged with fusion culture of Bhil with Adivasi Catholic identity[4].

The preaching by priests is the open witnessing of religious and Bhil have suffered serious setbacks and their social work is being rendered as obsolete. As a result, for further growth and preservation of the Catholic faith among the Nomadic Bhils are more aggressive. Had the local Catholics been promoted in various fields in the past, local Bhil Church would have been more strong and more self-sustaining today. Even elsewhere among *Barelas, Bhilalas, Korkus, Balahis, Gonds and Satnamis* in Madhya Pradesh (MP), there would be more strong and more self-sustaining local churches and the local Christian community would be established.

The local nomadic Catechists can also move, more freely like nomads or Gypsies with Nomadic Bhils, but they are in contact with their priests, nuns and brothers, they made them *Dhram Pracharak*. This *Dharm Pracharak* (Nomadic Catechists) facilitates a two-way exchange own nomadic lifestyle and aiding the broader mission of evangelization among other nomadic groups. In this dynamic, the Catechists take on the role of cultural ambassadors, bridging the gap between their fellow nomads and the teachings of the Church. Bhil missions have trained pastoral, vocations to priesthood and religious life for the this are fast diminishing from South India. Catechists and volunteers are available but an easy substitute.

Source: *The Missionary Visitors*, 1912

On name of faith with Bhils, their catechists had organised various events such as social, cultural, political and religious meet and maintained their own traditional religious needs, so they shall maintain their own Catholic Church in Bhil within the framework of the Universal Church (Anderson, J.D, 1913). The Tribal anthropology been utilized as the early Divine World Missionaries (SVD) in Jhabua (M.P.) and the Jesuits (SJ) in Chotanagpur, the Bhil missions today would have been much fruitful and different today (Doshi J.K.,1973; Doshi S.L., 1971). The Church has not able to inculturate in the tribal cultures and traditions. It can still pursue the early Bhil mission methods now.

2. Christian Literature in Bhili and Other Tribal Languages

Tribal myths, religious rituals and religious folksongs all depict their religiosity and religious world views in the their folk life. The Bhils have their own religious world views, religiosity, oral language and literature, traditionally passed down orally[5]. Literate Bhils are not more than 25%. The same is true among Adivasi groups, except among few tribes like Oraon, Khadia, Munda etc., where Jesuit missionaries earlier did good mission work, for example in Chotanagpur missions.

Bible (New Testament, Psalms), catechism, life of saints, Bhajan Mandalis (Preaching through songs), rituals of blessings, Novenas, mass prayers, could be translated in their own folk languages, in this case Bhili and popularized easily (Bhuriya M, 1979). Initially the foreign SVD missionaries from Germany like Fr. Mocha SVD, Fr. Leon Jungblut SVD, and others like Fr. Francis OFM (Cap) from France started well, but the mission trend started by them, was not kept up by the Indian missionaries both in Indore Bhil missions of SVDs in M.P. and Capuchin Bhil missions of Ajmer diocese (M.P. and Rajasthan) (Kuriakose, M. K. ,1999).

This could have been done long ago on the large scale, making use of a system of folk-communication. Now Christian folksongs, Biblical narratives and translations do exist but not enough as to make the system working. Therefore, the Christian literature available in Bhili and other tribes become prime importance as source of inspiration, animation, maintenance, preservation and perpetuation of Catholic faith through oral

tradition (Chungath Paul, 2011). In the past not enough efforts were made for the preservation and perpetuation of faith orally among the Bhils and among the vast majority of illiterate tribes of India. Not much attention has been paid to provide a system in tribal folk-communication among Bhils through their own folk medias. There is scope over here. In this connection preservation of tribal languages like Bhili, Bhilali, Korku, Gondi and other tribal folk-languages is necessary (Jungblut; Koppers, 1943).

3. Themes can be Transfused Through Adivassi Folk - Songs (Lokgeet)

Folksongs (*lokgeet*) are the most powerful bearer of tribal-themes even today. And media of folk songs as a communication has been prevalent among the tribals for many centuries among illiterate people. This method was very functional and practical for the Bhils and other tribes to preserve their Catholic faith. The pastoral training include this method for creating new folk with catholic folk Bhajan. Trained leaders of church creates new sense of symbols, complex rituals that convert Bhils to accept Catholic faith (Lobo, Lency, 1991).

For over three milleniums or more, the Bhils have been preserving and perpetuating their social, cultural, political, religious, economic values and other cultural themes through folksongs and other forms of oral literature. Pastoral evangelization through Adivasi folk songs serves melodic patterns of passing the gospel message and culturally resonant medium for spreading the Christian message among indigenous communities in India. This approach intertwines the rich tapestry of Adivasi culture with the faster conversion to Christianity.

4. Baptism Through Bhil Catechists

Baptism through Bhil catechists has rapidly emerged as a vital and transformative process within the tribal Catholic Church, particularly among the nomadic Bhil communities. This burgeoning movement reflects a unique blend of faith and cultural identity, as the Bhil catechists, often members of the very communities they serve, bridge the gap between traditional Christian teachings and indigenous beliefs. Hence catechists, animators and volunteers could function as contact persons. Promoters of faith could be deputed by local Bishops and Parish Priests to perform some rituals, which will help the Bhils to grow stronger in their faith. Otherwise, the Bhil Church will lose its vigor.

The fast-growing phenomenon encapsulates a larger narrative of revitalization. 50% of migrants could be prevented from joining some other religions and Christian religious sects. Therefore, the administration of Baptism could be delegated to the nomadic catechists. Similarly, Catechists can conduct some more rituals like marriage, death and burial services, and others which are pertaining to them in grave necessity, in danger of life and death. Today, Bhils and other tribes do not receive sufficient pastoral care.

Pastoral Activities of Gypsy in Churches Focused in Europe could also be Extended in Asia. The Nomadic Church (*Tapra Church)* being done today in India and other parts of South Asia is reflections pastoral and anthropological training of Pastoral Tribes in Madhya Pradesh. There is fast growing of nomadic pastoral care in the Church among *Bhils, Gonds, Barelas, Bhilalas, Oraons, Korkus, Santhals, Warlis, Khatkaries* and other tribes of India. The Church in the Bhil area, tribal India and other parts of Asia should become more and more

pastoral minded for nomadic, *Itinerant* people. There is urgent need for giving pastoral care to tribals of nomadic origin in most of the Tribal dioceses of India. Educated and government employee from Nemadic Bhil which are already having pastoral training started to invade with other villages and region by using government machinery.

5. Pastoral Care of Nomadic Bhils

A. infrastructures for the Pastoral Care

The nomads and itinerant people get maximum pastoral care in India. These nomadic Bhils and other tribals are welcomed in the parishes of major cities and towns to where they migrate. Archbishop Pascal Topno S.J of the Archdiocese of Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh, India) is creating an ideal infrastructure for the Pastoral Care of Nomadic Bhils and other Tribal-Catholics. This awareness is coming to the missions of *Bhils, Bhilalas, Barelas, Korkus,* etc., of Indore Diocese and the Bhil Missions of Udaipur (Rajasthan) diocese, both of which have now very strong Catholic Bhil populations.

B. Domestic Church

The people, who are not in government and private services, who are not organized in social life and who have no proper means of livelihood, are bound to lead seasonal or nomadic or semi-nomadic life. Such Bhils are nearly 70% to 80%, roaming in Indore and Udaipur dioceses. In places like Mandla (MP), Raigarh (Chhatisgarh), Bastar (Chhatisgargh), thousands of *Gonds, Oraon* and other tribals of Catholic origin migrate to nearby towns and cities like Jabalpur, Raipur, Bilaspur, Nagpur, Sagar, Gwalior etc., where they get practically very good pastoral care.

Bhopal City is full of semi-nomadic *Bhils, Oraons, Gonds, Pardhis* and other tribes of Central India. They need a *Tapra Church* (domestic church) in Adivasi style, which is being created in the Archdiocese of Bhopal by Archbishop Pascal Topno S.J. and his priests. The tribal migrants and Bhils, who come to urban areas for government and other regular jobs and who have settled down the existing parishes, are not considered as nomads. They are parishioners like any other people migrating from South Indian dioceses. And they all get pastoral care properly.

Conclusion:

Tribal culture and folklore hold a significant place within the narratives of Church history and ecclesiastical outreach, particularly among indigenous communities like the Bhils. The recognition of tribal folklore by Church personnel illustrates an important intersection of faith and cultural heritage, where traditional stories, rituals, and beliefs are acknowledged not merely as remnants of a bygone era but as vital threads that weave the fabric of community identity. The Bhil tribe, rich in vibrant folklore, possesses a unique narrative structure that reflects their close relationship with nature, spiritual beliefs, and social norms. However, the risk of losing this folklore looms large, particularly in the face of increasing globalization and cultural assimilation that often accompany religious conversion. Should the Bhil folklore fade into obscurity, it would not just signify a loss

of stories and traditions; it would equate to the erosion of a distinct cultural identity that has endured for generations.

Instead, there is a danger that the rich tapestry of Bhil traditions could be supplanted by a homogenized Christian biblical narrative, which, while valuable in its own right, may not resonate with the deep-seated cultural values and practices that define the Bhil community. The imperative to preserve Bhil folklore emerges not just as a matter of cultural pride, but as a profound necessity for the survival of their unique worldview, illustrating that the coexistence of Christian beliefs and indigenous lore can enrich both faith and culture, fostering a landscape where diverse narratives thrive rather than compete. In a world that is often quick to erase the distinctiveness of tribal identities in the name of religious or cultural uniformity, the plea to safeguard Bhil folklore emerges as a call to honour and respect the intricate mosaic of human expression, where each story matters in the grand narrative of existence.

Foot notes:

[1]*Preface,* Indore: Survey of Indore Diocese, 1979.
[2]*The Nature of Religious Songs of the Bhils* Folklore 18:227-232, Calcutta
[3]*The Songs of Bhil Women*. Cahiers de Literature Orale, No. 10:99-109, Paris, France.
[4] *Tribal Religion in India*: *A Case study of the Bhils* Social Campas 26: Louvain, Belgium.
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