

# **Among the Savaras**

## **The evangelization of the tribal populations in India**

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In the vast mountain areas of southern Orissa and northern Andhra Pradesh live one of the most primitive and backward tribals of India. They are called Savaras, Soras, Soboros, or Souras. Numbering around 2.2 million souls, they are believed to have migrated from southeast Asia, together with other Munda and Ho groups of tribals. They are the first settlers of the land, hence they are called Adivasis, or Aborigines. Since they belong to a particular group of primitive peoples, claiming a common ancestry, sharing a common culture, and originally living under a chief or headman, they are called tribals. Most of them were nomadic, wandering in search of food for themselves and for their cattle. At present they are definitely settled in four districts of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.

Although the Christian missionaries, especially Baptists and Lutherans, started evangelization works among the Savaras from the very beginning of the British Raj, Catholic evangelization among the Savaras began only recently. Though traces of Catholic Faith could be found in this part of India from the 17th century onwards, evangelization work as such was started by the M.S.F.S. Fathers from Visakhapatnam in 1845, when it became a diocese.

At the request of the Holy See, the Spanish Vincentians of the Madrid Province took up the evangelization of this area, from the hands of the M.S.F.S. Fathers. At that time, it was called the Cuttack Mission. In 1922 four pioneer missionaries arrived and started evangelization work in the area. They penetrated into the interior areas and evangelized the people with much enthusiasm and zeal in the face of great difficulties and privations. In the beginning they directed their attention at the Harijan and Khond communities. They evangelized a large number, especially among the Harijan community. The Church was firmly established; institutions for education, health care, and social and developmental works were also established for these communities. The missionaries made sporadic attempts of evangelizing the Savara community and a few villages of Bodopoda and Gunupur range. But due to differences of language, culture, life situations, and approachability and lack of personnel, the evangelization works among them could not proceed until recently. A different and singular approach had to be done for their proper evangelization and establishment of the Church among them.

The training and ordination of native Indian priests helped in the progress of evangelization among the tribals. As an example, after I was ordained in Salamanca, Spain, I returned with enough knowledge and enthusiasm to work in the mission field

of Orissa. At my arrival, the Vincentian Philosophy department at Gopalpur was just starting and I was requested to teach there for three years. Upon my request, I was sent to Bodopoda range as my first mission field of pastoral and missionary activities. It was mainly a "Baptist-converted-Catholic" community and had its own specific problems. As a new missionary, I placed myself under the guidance of an old catechist of the range, Bhokthinato. Because of the latter's prudent, wise and experienced guidance, I was able to solve the pastoral problems and gradually introduce myself into the Christian as well as non-Christian communities.

There were already a few catholic Savara villages in Bodopoda range. I found them as a very special kind of people whom I had not met before. I acquired a good knowledge of the Savaras as a people from this small but energetic and lively Savara Catholic community. I accepted the Savara community as it was, with all its good qualities and defects. I accepted their language, culture, good customs, food, lodging, and accommodated myself to their poor, helpless life situations. With the help of a catechist, I learned their language, translated liturgical prayers and Holy Mass and composed hymns and popular songs in Savara tune and rhythm. The Savaras have their own traditional music and dance and it is an important part of their tribal life. I translated the small catechism book, together with some additional questions and answers needed for their community. All these literary works were printed in Savara (roman) letters. Most of the children and adults learn easily these letters and know how to read and write in them so the missionaries were able to conduct all the liturgical prayers fully in Savara with the full participation of the faithful. It was a glorious and memorable day for me and for the Savara tribal community, when they offered the Holy Mass for the first time in Savara, with all solemnity and pomp, with the full participation of the whole community. "Naba, kudduben jumba..." those were the words of Christ, now in the Savara language, among the Savaras, in a far interior village! In the course of time, it was to be repeated in hundreds of villages!

With the help of a catechist, I started visiting more and more new Savara villages, communicating to them the message of Christ, in a way understandable and accommodated to them. We found them like sheep without a shepherd under great poverty and misery, fear and exploitation, driven here and there in confusion and despair. We used to take to them nothing but the Message of Christ, greet them and talk with them, with great love and appreciation. Through dialogue, music or symbols, we used to make them understand the "Good News" and essential principles of the Catholic Faith. We have communicated the "message, Good News," in its integrity and purity, according to our capacity. Now, it is up to the Holy Spirit and them to react. And the reactions were very varied. Some refused it outright and chased us away, some looked with suspicion and fear, still, some asked us to wait and come again and a few accepted it wholeheartedly. To those who accepted the message we had to go several times again and strengthen their convictions and lead them to the Faith. For them, the initiation to Catholic community was not the regeneration by baptism, but the abandonment or rejection of the evil spirits and all things connected with them. Hence it was done with great solemnity and in the presence of some witnesses. Baptism would be given only after two or three years,

after proper preparation and understanding. Liberated from sins and superstitions of all kinds, they find peace, joy and rest in Jesus Christ! This helps them to rise up in the economic, social and educational status and to form a healthy, dignified, and active tribal society.

Up to the year 1975, I was mainly working among the Savaras from existing parishes of Bodopoda and Gunupur. Soon the need of moving to fully Savara areas and establishing small centers, and afterwards, developing them to full pledged parishes was felt. For that, necessary permissions were sought and obtained from the local Ordinaries (Orissa and A.P.). I remembered with enormous love and gratitude, Rev. Fr. James W. Richardson \_ may his soul rest in peace \_ the then Superior General, who sent the necessary permissions, very encouraging letters, and financial help to start the first Savara Mission Center of Christnagar, at present a huge parish, and mother of many parishes and centres. My love and appreciation, gratitude and prayer for Rev. Fr. Richard McCullen, the previous Superior General, and for Rev. Fr. Robert Maloney, the present Superior General, for their continuous support, prayers and financial help for this beautiful evangelization work. It is worth mentioning, with special gratitude, the financial help which Rev. Fr. Robert Maloney has sent recently for the Mission station of Katiki-Sulludi-Ramanaguda. After completing the preliminary evangelization works and establishing a good Catholic community in that area and entrusting it to one of our Fathers, I moved to a new area \_ Parlakhimundi-Narayanapur \_ for evangelization and establishment of the Church there.

The beginnings of Christnagar Mission Centre was very simple and humble, so also with seven other mission centres which are now beautiful parishes with flourishing Catholic tribal communities, with the needed educational, health and developmental institutions. At the time of the visit of Rev. Fr. F. Kapu\_ciak, some of them were only poor huts but for our Savaras Catholics as well as Hindus, they were "Their Mission Centres," where they could freely come and pray and sing in their language without fear and shame, conduct meetings and conventions, reunions and feasts, display their tribal talents and abilities. They feel proud of these institutions and are ready to do everything in their power for their upkeep and improvement. So too are our dear benefactors. These tribal communities remember with love and gratitude all their beloved benefactors and pray for them even everyday in these centres. May the Good Lord of the Harvest bless all of them abundantly and reward them a hundredfold.

We have a very ambitious plan, in preparation for the great JUBILEE 2000 "KRISTO JOYONTI 2000," to start a Spiritual Retreat Centre, mainly for the Savara tribals and to spread the Word of God to every tribal of the vast area and country.

Almost all the Savaras accepted the Faith recently but have not studied it very deeply. They know and practice just the essentials of the Catholic faith, rituals and customs. Hence, they need to be taught the specific details to strengthen their faith and Catholic life. The Savaras appreciate very much the religious meetings, conventions and get togethers. Every year we have a few meetings of this type at one

place or another. To strengthen all these and to deepen the religiosity of the tribals, we need a small permanent centre, where they can spend a few days of prayer, meditation and renewal.

The command of Christ "Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to every creature," is relevant even today, particularly for the tribal communities. There are millions of tribals who have not heard the gospel message even today. This is true of the thousands of Savaras and Khonds who are ignorant of Christ and his message. Right in our midst are thousands who, when asked, say that they have never heard or known anything about the Saviour or about the Church. Hence, this plan of forming a small group of evangelizers who would visit the villages, particularly the tribal ones, and preach the Word of God.