

## Human Sacrifice among the Khonds of Orissa C.1836-1861: A Study

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### Abstract

*The Khonds of Orissa, who lived in the mountainous terrains independently with practically no contact with the outside world, practised human sacrifices to their deity, the Earth-Goddess since time immemorial. After its discovery by the British in 1836, attempts using various measures including a agency specifically meant to suppress the rite resulted in the substitution of the rite with animals. Contact with the British and the Christian missionaries exposed the Khonds to a larger society with socio-economic consequences.*

**Keywords:** Orissa, Khonds, human sacrifice, Meriah, Christian Missionaries

Sacrifice is a religious rite in which an object is offered to a divinity. According to Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, a British Anthropologist, it was a gift to the gods to secure their favour or minimise their hostility (Edward B. Tylor, 1871). A gift of sacrifice could be an offering of food, objects or even the life of animals. Human sacrifice is the offering of the life of a human being to a deity. Basic to both animal and human sacrifice is the recognition of blood as the sacred life force in man and beast. The sacrificing of a human being is part of an attempt to commune with a God and to participate in divine life. Human sacrifices were made for a variety of reasons which have been well attested in the past. In what is now Mexico, the belief that the sun needed human nourishment led to the sacrifice of

thousands of victims annually in the Aztec and Nahua Calendrical maize (corn) ritual. The Inca confined wholesale sacrifices to the occasion of the accession of a ruler. Among the African Asante, the victim sacrificed as first fruit offerings during the Festival of New Yams were usually criminals, though slaves also were killed (Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2018). The occurrence of human sacrifice, thus, appears to have been widespread and its intentions various ranging from communion with a god and participation in his divine life to expiation and the promotion of the earth's fertility.

This paper is an attempt to look into such kind of human sacrifices prevalent among the tribal Khonds of Orissa since time immemorial until they were

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discovered by the British and suppressed. The period 1836-1861 covers the duration when the British discovered the existence of the rite in 1836 and 1861 saw the abolition of the Meriah agency which was instituted by the British to abolish the human sacrifice marking the successful suppression. Contact with the British and Christian missionaries changed the outlook of the Khonds and propel them towards socio-economic progress.

Orissa has the second concentration of tribals with a population of 59, 15,067 (according to 1981 census). The tribal population constituting about 23% of the total population of the state is distributed among 62 tribes unevenly habited in all districts of the state. Of all these tribes, the most numerous are the Khonds, the Santal, the Saora, the Bhattada, the Bhuniya and the smallest tribes are the Berhor, the Bonda, the Didaya, the Mankidia etc. According to numbers quoted by the Census Commissioner of Assam in 1965, the Khonds are the seven largest of the 293 major tribal groups in India (Barbara M. Boal, 1973). Little is known of their origin beyond the fact that they are descendants of the ancient Dravidian inhabitants of India.

The British knew very little of the Khonds of Orissa before 1836, although some references to this tribe was made by the first resident of Ganjam in 1767. They were an interesting wild race who became known to the public due to the efforts of government and the Christian missionaries (Orissa District Gazeteers, 1945).

### **The Khonds: Their habitat and Society**

The Khonds or the Khands are a Dravidian tribe who lived predominantly in the hills of Orissa and neighbouring districts. The Oriyas called them Kandhs and the Telugu people gond or Kods. Both the words are derived from the Telugu word 'Konds' which means hill (G.A. Grierson, 1967). Their habitat was the hills separating the districts of Ganjam and Vizagapatnam in the then Madras Presidency and continuing northwards into the Orissa tributary States of Baud, Daspalla, and Nayagarh, and crossing the Mahanadi, into Angul and the Khondmals (G.A. Grierson, 1967).

The Khonds are a hardy, war-like race of men, well accustomed to jungle life. They were also bold and fitfully laborious mountain peasantry of dignified manners, proud of their positions as landowners; and tenacious of their rights (E. Thurston, 2001). With only the slightest contact with the plains, the Khonds preserved their independence as a distinct nationality but they remained conservative and backward. Their vices were the indulgences in revenge, and occasionally of brutal passion. Drunkenness was universal (W.W. Hunter, 1877).

Caste system is absent among the Khonds and they have no caste prejudices unlike the plains of India (John Campbell, 1861). Tattooing was largely practised and the Khonds used tattoo all over their bodies with artistic designs. The males

wore long hairs which were tied with a piece of red cloth and decorated with bright feathers of a peacock or other favourite bird. Both men and women wore minimal garments. Since the thick jungles surrounding their habitat were infested by wild beasts like bears, panthers, tigers, panthers etc., they sheltered together with their cattle and thereby lived in a very unhygienic environment which very often led to epidemics. They knew nothing about money and they detested trade of every sort (W.W. Hunter, 1877). They were ruled by headman or 'Mallika' in each village 'Mutha'. Theoretically, each tribe sprung from a common father and it is governed by a patriarch who represents the common ancestor. The Patriarch was also the head priest who could explain the cause of natural calamity and prescribed Meriah sacrifice to propitiate the earth Goddess to protect the community from her wrath manifested through war and natural calamities (John Cambell, 1986).

The Khonds lived on agriculture, forest produce and hunting. Their wants were very few and locally met. They produced crops like turmeric, oilseed, ginger, herbs, honey and mouhya flowers (Macpherson Report, 1842).

### **Belief System of the Khonds**

The belief system of the Khonds took shape with the development of their cultivation process in course of their time as they came in contact with the Hindu socio-economic system based on the agrarian economy. The fear of the

unknown haunted the khonds which they began to attribute to the deities, dead ancestors and sorcery causing natural calamities and epidemics. To escape from these misfortunes they developed magico-religious rites administered by the priests, named as Jani. Being agriculturists, the earth was worshipped as mother goddess to reap a good harvest. They developed a strange method of worshipping Tari Pennu (Earth Goddess) with the purpose of fertilising the earth by blood and saving the crops from random havoc by natural calamities (The Calcutta Review, 1842). So, human sacrifice among the Khonds was both a social institution and a religious rite which underlay a close identity between the ecclesiastical and temporal interests of the tribesmen. It was a means of propitiating the earth goddess whose favours were needed to maintain the fertility of the soil. It was also a form of public expiation to the anger of the goddess to avert droughts, epidemics and other natural calamities (Home Department). The khonds believed that the blood of the victims caused the redness of the turmeric, an important crop of the tribal tract, and his tears brought the rains (Dr. Kanchanmoy Mojumdar, 1980).

The origin of the human sacrifices among the khonds can be traced in their legendary accounts. The earth, the khonds believed, was originally a crude and unstable mass unfit for the comfortable habitation of man. It was not conducive to cultivation too. Then the Earth-God ordered to split human blood before him

and the khonds complied with this demand by sacrificing a child. Then the soil became firm and productive herewith and the deity ordered man to repeat the rite and live (W.W. Hunter, 1877). In course of time it became a deep seated religious faith. Association in human sacrifice formed as an indispensable nexus of union among the Khonds and it helped in the maintenance of the community spirit in the tribesmen.

### **Meriah**

The victims of human sacrifices were called Meriah in Oriya although the khonds called them Toki or Keddi (John Cambell, 1986). The victims could be a male or female and could be from any caste except Brahmins and Khonds. Though adult males were preferred and they are the costliest, victims of any age was accepted. Female Meriah were allowed to marry to Khond males and the children of that union automatically became a Meriah but they were never sacrificed in the village in which they were born but instead exchanged with a Meriah from other villages. The victim 'must be bought with a price' otherwise they were considered not acceptable to the Earth Goddess (W.W. Hunter, 1877). They were always purchased from the Panos, one of the low castes who were attached to every Khond villages. The victims were procured often by kidnapping them in the plains. But usually every year they moved into the plains, and purchased a number of small boys and girls from the poorer sections of the Hindus and sold them to

the Khonds who nurtured them till at least they were seven years old (S.P. Carey, 1936). The cost of Meriah varied from place to place and from time to time ranging from fifteen to two hundred rupees (Nihar Ranjan Patnaik, 1992). The price was paid in livestock, brass vessels, corn and even land.

The human sacrifices were classified as public and private. While public sacrifice was offered by a tribe or a village as an entity, private sacrifices were offered by individuals (W.W. Hunter, 1877). The public sacrifice of the Earth Goddess was done twice a year-at the time of sowing and at the harvest time- where they sprinkled blood in their fields. They did this in their belief that the process of fertilization would be facilitated by drenching the sterile soil with blood (Nihar Ranjan Patnaik, 1992). A Human victim became equally necessary when the terrible Earth Goddess sent pestilence upon the people. Private sacrifices were done by families whenever sickness or great distress came upon them.

The mode of sacrifice differed from place to place. But the most common practice was that the Priest, the Jani, would first wound the Meriah with his axe after which the crowd would rush to the victim and stripped the flesh from his bones keeping the head and intestines untouched (Herbert Risley, 1915). They would then rush to their respective fields and bury them believing that this would fertilize their fields.

**Discovery of Human sacrifice among the Khonds by the British:**

It was in 1836 that Meriah sacrifice among the Khonds was discovered by the British. In 1835, the Chief of Ghumsar Estate rebelled against the British government and he took refuge among the Khonds. Ghumsar was then a feudal possession, tributary to the British. In 1835-36, the British started their operations against the Chief with G.E.Russell, the Senior Member of the Board of Revenue of the Madras Presidency, as the Leader. For the first time, they ascended the Ghats which lay at the back of the district of Ganjam. This is how they made their first acquaintance with the Khonds and their country (J.W. Jaye, 1966). It was only then that G.E.Russell discovered the existence of human sacrifice and brought it to the notice of the Government in his first Report of August 12 of 1836 submitted on the affairs of Ghumsar. Subsequently Lieutenant Samuel Charters Macpherson of the Madras Army who was employed during the Ghumsar rebellion to survey a part of the country at the foot of the hills, brought the existence of such sacrifices to the notice of the British Government in 1836. Two years later, Lieutenant Hill of the Survey Department also reported about the prevalence of Meriah sacrifices among the Khonds in Jepypore, Bastar, Chinna Kimeddy, Ghumsar, Baud, Sonapur and Daspalla. In fact this practice had been there for through centuries in the whole range of Khondistan, about which the

outer world knew nothing (S.P. Carey, 1936).

**Difficulties involved in suppression and establishment of Meriah Agency:**

After the discovery of the human sacrifices practised by the Khonds, the British didn't and couldn't immediately make an attempt to stop it. The difficulties in implementing any measures were many-fold. Firstly, the Khonds had practised this rite since time immemorial and how could you make a tribe give up a practice which they felt was 'essential for the very existence of mankind and the continuance of their own species' as it used to provide productive powers to nature? Especially when they believed that God had positively ordained them to perform the rite. Further, the rite had been sanctioned by the Rajas who had jurisdiction over them even though they exercised little control over them. Secondly, the British knew very little about the Khonds, their country, language and culture and any policies to counter them would antagonise a tribe who had a strong feeling of clanship. Thirdly, the Khond-inhabited areas being very hilly terrain with no roads and infested with wild beasts, it was not conducive for a rash operation. Besides, the Khonds being illiterate and having no contact with the outside world live in a very unhygienic environment living together with their cattle, goats and fowls where pestilence very commonly occurred. In such a condition, the British felt that officials would find it difficult in implementing any policy which would

require them to live among the tribes. Lastly, the Khonds were zealously proud of their never conquered independence and the British backed off from any kind of action which could involve them in a prolonged and disastrous war (S.P. Carey, 1936). So the British instead decided to formulate a slow and steady policy which would ultimately let the tribe give up this practice voluntarily.

The British formulated various policies like making the Khonds integral and progressive members of the British Indian Empire, making an attempt to discover the real cause of the practice in order to be able to end it, using moral influence and persuasion, helping the tribes in calamities, convincing them that fertility and prosperity could be achieved without human sacrifice and inducing them to have intercourse with other tribes. British officer like John Macpherson, who was actively involved in the suppression of the rite, made various recommendations like exerting personal influence, trying to win over the Khond Priests who were chiefly associated with the rite and winning over those Zamindars who managed to have direct influences over the Khonds by awarding them honorary gifts and privileges etc. Since the British were keen to suppress the rite, their policy also passed through several phases of experimentation, of trial and error. It therefore, took time to adopt an effective policy to do so. Generally speaking, the Government's efforts until 1845 were 'partial, unconnected and unsustained'.

Thereafter the efforts became 'combined, sustained, continuous and systematic' (Dr. Kanchanmoy Mojumdar, 1980). Thus, even though the British knew the existence of human sacrifices among the Khonds in 1836, it was only after 1845 that effective measure could be taken with the establishment of the Meriah Agency. An Act XXI, of 1841 was passed and it created an agent to the Governor General of India whose main duty was to suppress human sacrifice and female infanticide (which was also prevalent among the Khonds). He was commonly known as the Meriah Agent or the Hill agent. The Meriah Agency was given the authority over the entire tribal tract which was then divided under the administrative jurisdiction of the Governments of Bengal and Madras. John Macpherson was made the first Agent for the suppression of the Meriah sacrifices.

Arduous efforts were made by the Agency officers in their attempt to stop the human sacrifices among the Khonds. Officers like G.E. Russell, Captain William Macpherson, Captain Frye, John Cadenhead, Lt. Colonel Campbell, Lt. Hill and Mc. Neill were appointed and entrusted to take steps regarding the suppression of the Meriah sacrifice. An attitude of firmness without resorting to force was their guideline of action. Macpherson spent his energy in familiarizing himself with the Khonds, conversing with them freely, giving presents of cloth, tobacco and even money to purchase liquor. He distributed beads

to the Khond women at every station, went hunting with the Khond Chiefs, smoked with them, gave them presents and was kind to their children when all the while they were told that favours given to them would depend on their exertion towards the abolition of the sacrifice. The majority of them promised to work towards this end but often some Chiefs broke their promise. Hundreds of Meriahs were rescued before they were sacrificed. From 1837 to 1845, the Madras authorities took steps in rescuing the Meriahs in their jurisdiction and their officers by following the policy of persuasion and repression, saved many victims. Campbell rescued one hundred and twenty five victims (Dasarathi Swaro, 1990). S.C.Macpherson in 1843-44, rescued two hundred and fifty five victims from being sacrificed to the Earth Goddess. By April 1853, twelve hundred and sixty victims had been rescued in all years. From 1837 to 1854, as many as fifteen hundred and four Meriahs were rescued by the government. Dr.John Buckley, a missionary of Orissa, estimated that government rescued seventeen hundred victims from the horrible rite (S.P. Carey, 1936).

### **Other measures adopted for the suppression of Meriah sacrifice**

The British government also adopted various other measures to bring about the suppression of the rite.

#### **Promotion of Education:**

The British Government considered promoting education as a necessary tool

to break down the prejudices of the Khonds and bring them within the pale of civilization. Captain Frye, one of Lt.Campbell's staff was a university man and a born linguist. He gave the Kui tongue (the language of the Khonds) its first written form using the Oriya script. He brought back with him from his furlough a lithographic press. Using this press, the alphabet in Kui was printed for the first time. With the Kui-Oriya dictionary in hand, a considerable number of school books were prepared in Kui language. Village schools were established. Its progress was, however, slow as the Khond Chiefs feared that calamities would occur if schools were opened. With the government assurance of not using violence or imposing British ideas on them, the Khonds began to send their children to schools (John Cambell, 1986). By 1860-61, the progress of the schools was reported to be very satisfactory with 521 students in them (Dr. Kanchanmoy Mojumdar, 1980). The Missionaries had also started Mission schools by this time.

#### **Medical Aid:**

To improve the health of the regularly infested Khond hills with diseases like cholera and small pox, the British took the measure of supplying medical aid as a necessary step to bring home the prejudices of the Khonds that diseases were caused by the wrath of the deities and hence to be propitiated. Medical officers were, therefore, appointed in the Meriah Agency and hospitals were opened.

#### Construction of Roads:

Construction of roads in the heart of the Khond Hills was yet another step to civilize the Khonds to give up the Meriah sacrifice. The construction of roads was deemed necessary to make the exploration of the Khond area more accessible (John Cambell, 1986). Some of the rescued Meriahs were employed in the work of road construction.

#### Fairs:

Macpherson in his report suggested that opening of fairs would promote intercourse between the Khonds and the surrounding Hindu population whereby they would develop a friendly and familiar contact with the outside world. This, he hoped, would indirectly help them in abandoning the human sacrifice (Macpherson Report, 1842). So fairs were regularly set up which subsequently improved the socio-economic conditions of the Khonds.

The Meriah officers also formulated an alternative option of sacrificing human being in the Khonds' religious rites. They adopted a policy of explaining the virtues of substituting buffaloes and goats for human beings (S.P. Carey, 1936).

The constant and consistent efforts of the Meriah or Hill Agents by applying these various measures and policies ultimately bore fruit and between 1855 and 1861 hardly a dozen victims had been killed (Nihar Rahjan Hota, 1960). The last Meriah to have been recorded sacrificed

was in the year 1861 and in the same year the Meriah agency was abolished marking the successful suppression of human sacrifices among the Khonds. It is pertinent to add here that the British didn't totally suppressed the rite but all it wanted was the substitution of human beings by buffaloes and goats and thereafter sacrifices to the Earth Goddess was continued with animals.

With regard to the rehabilitation of the Meriahs, close cooperation existed between the government officials and the missionaries (Barbara M. Boal, 1963). The rehabilitation of the Meriah children were entrusted to the Orissa missionaries and the task was done by them.

#### **Activities of the Christian Missionaries among the Khonds**

The Christian Missionaries came soon after the occupation of Orissa by the British in 1803. The most prominent missionary society in Orissa, the General Baptist Missionary Society (GBMS), was established as early as 1816 (James Peggs, 1846) and various Mission Stations were established by the Society in Orissa. W. Brown, a GBMS missionary made an extensive tour of Khondistan in 1837 to ascertain about the people, their language and culture and to see whether 'this unknown region might be brought within the operation of their mission' (Mr. W. Brown, 1837). Later on missionaries like Amos Sutton, Isaac Stubbins and John Buckley proposed the setting up of a mission station in the Khond territory.

They appealed to the public regarding the proposal of the same through various newspapers and journals (Mr. W. Brown, 1837).

By 1845, Sutton proposed to start a mission work among them for the reason that the mission had taken care of many meriahs who knew the Khond language and he was hopeful that these rescued Meriahs would help the missionaries in preaching Christianity among the Khonds. The GBMS issued circulars to different parts of India to establish a mission station. However, inspite of the proposal of the GBMS Committee, no permanent station was established in the Khond tract. John Orissa Goadby, the first European to go to India whose purpose was to give his life to the Khonds, was stationed in Russelkonda (the headquarters of the Meriah Agency in the hill-tracts of Orissa for the suppression of the Meriah scarifices and female infanticide named after G.E.Russell who discovered the practice) which was already a Mission station from which he would worked for the Khonds (S.P. Carey, 1936). Goadby toured the Khond lands during 1862-63 and made reports on the land, the language and faith of its people. Again in three extensive tours in 1865, he explored the various gateways into the Khond hills. Goadby learnt to speak in Kui, the language of the Khonds. He and his wife served the Khonds till 1867 when he was transferred to Pipli to serve the famine orphans. He died in 1868 at the young age of 38. After his death, no further attempt

was made to reach the Khonds by the GBMS until the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Barbara M. Boal, 1963). It was not until 1914 and 1920 that the first baptism and the first church building was achieved among the khonds. So in the period concerned, the activities of the Missionaries was more successful in terms of rehabilitation of the rescued Meriahs and spreading Christianity among them if one talks in terms of conversions to Christianity. This is not to say, however, that the impact of the Christianity was not felt at all.

The Government adopted a very considerate attitude to the rescued Meriahs and most of them were entrusted to the care of the missionaries. The missionaries opened orphanages and asylums for these Meriahs and they were reared up in Cuttack, Berhampur and Balasore orphanages. The asylums established by the missionaries provided education to these Meriahs as well as to the children of native Christians. The purpose of the education was to make them useful members of the society. Thus, students, after completion of six hours of study, had to attend three hours of manual work. The object of the missionaries was to make them sensible, moral, industrious and pious young men and women. The missionaries also aimed to make the women good housewives for the native Christians (Amos Sutton, 1839).

In order to preach Christianity among the Khonds, the missionaries had to learn both Kui and Oriya languages. The

missionaries marked that the Khonds generally took interest to know about Christianity as they had no such prejudices like the Hindus and managed to convert to Christianity. They brought almost all the Meriahs to the fold of Christianity (Amos Sutton, 1839).

In order to enable the Khonds to learn the scriptures, the missionaries distributed tracts and scripture portions written either in Kui or Oriya and their efforts resulted in translations to the Khond language. They, thus, not only enriched the Khond literature but through their missionary operation in the Khond tracts, they managed to create a great impact in the traditional tribal society. They changed the outlook of the converts in various ways. With the contact of the missionaries and especially those who became Christians, they practically disallowed the tattooing of their arms and faces, which the Khonds practiced on a large scale. They started minimising their habit of drinking with the advice of the missionaries or the native converts. Those who became Christians left the traditional pattern of worship. Some of the rescued meriahs also played an important role in changing the outlook of the Khonds in various ways. Thus, though the missionary activities among the Khonds did not yield a good number of converts yet their contact changed their outlook in the long run (Barbara M. Boal, 1963).

### **Conclusion**

After the British discovery of the practice of human sacrifices by the

Khonds, earnest efforts were made by both the British government and the Christian Missionaries to 'civilize' them through various measures like education, medical aid, setting up fairs, preaching, distributing tracts and trying to Christianise them. These measures were over and above the policies directly adopted to suppress the human sacrifices. Human sacrifice was a religious rite followed by the Khonds over centuries and which has become a part of their culture and tradition. By criticising this culture and aiming to supplant it, the colonial ideology of an 'orientalist' representation of India is clearly visible. The British promoted the idea of the superiority of modern western civilization and they try to establish cultural hegemony. At the same time, the Christian missionaries considered the Khonds' religious and social and religious life as 'culturally inferior, intellectually backward and religiously superstitious' and sought to 'civilize' them by trying to convert them to Christianity. The question, here, is the impact which the contact with the British and the Christian missionaries and the suppression of human sacrifice had on the Khond society. British contact with the Khonds caught the latter between compulsions of tradition and forces of change and exposed them to a larger society and new economic forces. Their sources of income tended to get diversified with the establishment of fairs and frontier markets. They began to work as labourers to make roads, some became small traders while others worked in government offices. By suppressing the Meriah

sacrifice, the government prevented the Khonds from an unprofitable investment, for every Meriah had to be bought with a price. Treatment of diseases and education to a large extent dispel the belief of the Khonds in super natural causes. Contact with the missionaries changed their outlook and they began to reduce their practice of tattooing and drinking. Those who embraced Christianity left their traditional pattern of worship. Literature developed as a result of missionary activities. Thus, in spite of the colonial ideology of the 'orientalist' attitude of the British towards the Khonds, the influence of the British and Christian missionaries heralded changes towards a wider society among the Khonds.

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