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## Working with the Santals: Pastoral and Educational Approaches

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**Abstract:** The Santals are the largest tribe in the Jharkhand state of India in terms of population and are also found in the states of Assam, Tripura, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and West Bengal. They have a sizeable population in Nepal and Bhutan. The Santals speak Santali, the most widely spoken of the Munda languages. In this article, one of the veteran missionaries working among the Santals in Jharkhand, Fr K.M. Jacob, SJ, reflect on his personal experiences of 58 years based on his committed hard work.

**Keywords:** Santal tribe, Jesuit mission, Evangelisation, Education

The Santals are a Munda ethnic group native to India and Bangladesh. Santals are the largest tribe in the Jharkhand state of

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India in terms of population and are also found in the states of Assam, Tripura, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and West Bengal. They have a sizeable population in Nepal and Bhutan. The Santals speak Santali, the most widely spoken of the Munda languages. In this article, one of the veteran missionaries working among the Santals in Jharkhand reflect on my personal experiences based on my committed work and how it has borne fruits.

### **The Living Faith**

The Jesuits started their apostolate among the Santals, the largest single tribal group in India, in 1925 at Majlispur village in the North Dinajpur District of West Bengal. The pioneering groups were Jesuits from Malta and Sicily of the Sicilian Province. My acquaintance with the 'Santal Mission' started in 1962 as a Jesuit Scholastic or trainee. The Santal Mission was a vast area, coinciding with the area of the newly erected Diocese of Dumka in 1962 (Vadappuram, 2021). At that time, namely 1962, the undivided Dumka Diocese had only 12 Mission Stations or parishes with resident Priests, Schools and Hostels for children. Two English medium schools were started, one in 1957 at Sahibganj by the Jesuits and the second at Madhupur by the CSST Sisters in 1958. Christians were very few and scattered in the villages, mostly far away from the Mission Centres. Fathers toured for days and weeks together to offer the Eucharist and other sacraments to the far away and scattered families among the large number of villages. People used to gather in large numbers in the parish centres for Christmas, Easter and for the Eucharistic procession once a year.

I was very much struck with the faith of the Christians when I started working as a priest in 1973, in the Southern part of North Bengal. There were only mostly two or three Catholic families in a village and these villages were scattered between large numbers of non-Christian villages. It became more real in 1990 when I visited 250 Catholic families in their villages of the newly envisaged Mission Station - the present Puranakeshri Mission, spread out within a

radius of 20 Kilometers in Dumka District of Jharkhand State. The Catholics were well formed in Faith.

### **Education and Church Leaders**

Till forty years ago, the fathers were trying to get children to our schools and hostels to educate them. But the trend has changed from 1980 onwards. We were not able to admit all who wanted to be in our schools and hostels (Jacob 2021). This was the reason for me to start a Primary Hostel at Puranakeshri, where the children were to attend the government school, just outside the Mission Campus. It has avoided the financial burden of establishing and running a school by us. Very few could afford to pay our low hostel fees. The growth of our old ‘Santal Mission’ is obvious from the following facts:

1. From one Diocese of Dumka in 1962, now there are three dioceses in this Mission / Province area, namely Purnea Diocese in North Eastern part of Bihar and Raiganj Diocese in the Southern part of North Bengal and Dumka Diocese, confined to the North Eastern part of Jharkhand.
2. In mid 1960s we had only four local priests from the undivided Dumka Diocese, whereas at present Dumka and Raiganj Dioceses have many Priests and Seminarians from within the Dioceses, besides a number of men and women religious. In the Diocese of Purnea, Evangelization and Developmental works started only about 40 years ago. It has grown a lot and is still growing.

### **Conclusion**

In total, what I have seen and experienced in 58 years of acquaintance with the ‘Santal Mission’ as a member of the province, starting from 1962 and my 48 years as a Priest in pastoral and education ministries, is a tremendous growth in evangelization and education (Lagun, 2021). People are open to the Faith and thirst for

education. Many are now employed in government and private establishments. Hence the economic growth. People have become progressive and development oriented and they are ready to put in hard work for their betterment. We can be proud and grateful to God as these are the results of the Church's service in evangelization and education of the Santals (Troisi, 2000). I feel that the hard work I have put in has borne ample fruit.

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