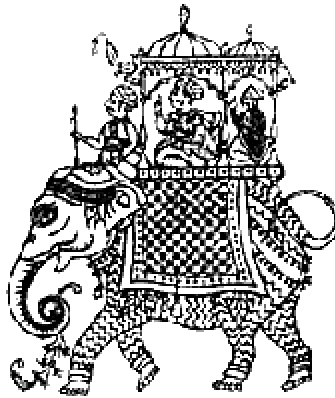


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**Crops and Flocks: Christian Villages and
Evangelical Entanglements**

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El Colegio de México



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**CROPS AND FLOCKS: CHRISTIAN
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Mine is not a paper in the strict sense of the term — at least, not yet. On offer instead is a patchwork — one that begins by threading together while equally unraveling articulations of the village within evangelical entanglements in the Chhattisgarh region in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. An orientation to what lies in front is in order at this point. Hopelessly unable to stop myself, I shall begin by raising a few quick questions concerning the changing fortunes of the village in the anthropology of India. This shall be followed by a discussion of a clutch of issues arising from the proselytizing endeavors of Euro-American missionaries and the political sociology of central-Indian converts. In the paper ahead, my considerations shall center on two villages: Bistrampur, established in the late 1860s by Oscar Lohr of the German Evangelical Mission Society; and Balodgahan bought in 1906 by the American Mennonite Mission. Here I will have more to say about Bistrampur.

Ambivalence surrounds the status of the village in the anthro-pology/sociology of India. Consider the manner in which the undermining of the village as a focal point of ethnographic enquiry has a longer history than first appears. George Pfefer's abstract for this panel indicates that such a move was implicit, for example, in Dumont's proposals and practice concerning a sociology of India that focused principally on caste and kinship. The example has wide implications. It is not simply that following Dumont as well as opposing him, an important part of the anthro-pology/sociology of the subcontinent moved away from key concerns of village studies. It is equally pertinent that in such endeavor the village often remained the locus of enquiry but not its central problematic. In other words, while classical village studies had addressed a range of themes by taking the village as their overarching rubric, the shift from them turned on using the village as primarily a setting in which to conduct discrete enquiries. In stating all this, my point concerns the requirements of attending to the multiple mappings of the category-entity of the village in the anthropology of India.

Needless to say, this multiplicity has itself come with loaded presuppositions regarding the village and the world. These require reexamination. To take one instance, against the grain of ready disciplinary assumptions, history and change were not entirely absent from classical village studies, even those based on functionalist premises. Rather, they could inhabit the edges of these accounts, marking a breach between change and transformation, that come from outside the village, and continuity and stability, that inhere within the community — a divide between external history and internal structure. Moreover, these narratives could present historical processes and contemporary developments as encompassing the village, thereby further inserting and instituting the bounded yet heterogeneous unit in a lasting ethnographic present — descriptively a place in history, analytically an entity out of time. Clearly, the consequences have not simply gone away. They persist in conceptions of temporality and modernity in the discipline at large as well as the ways in which the village remains a staple of teaching and research in several provincial and some metropolitan universities in India today.

Recently the village appears to have fallen off the map in most critical (and not so critical) anthropological endeavors. This apparent disappearance is also not without its attendant ambivalences. On the one hand, as is well known, in newer ethnography and historical anthropology, a close questioning of the limits of the “local” has been accompanied by the plural plotting of societies and cultures. Elaborations of the three “Ps” — practice, process, and power — and emphases on transnational procedures, intersecting cultures, and overlapping histories have all meant that the village has not fared too well here, since it has carried the taint of being, well, local. While the purpose of this panel is precisely to query such projections, it would also be silly not to learn from the strains of critical scholarship under discussion. At the very least, they point the way out of the Indian subcontinent as an anthropological end in itself. On the other hand, the exact learning here has to be accompanied by a prudent questioning of the formative assumptions of influential scholarship. Consider, for example, programmatic pronouncements for a multi-sited ethnography or for a novel anthropology for a changing world. Let us leave aside for the moment the fact that the world has been changing for a long time. The point is that there are problems with presuppositions that (often implicitly) seize upon apparent objects of intellectual inquiry, setting these as the singular yardstick for judging the scholarly novelty and the theoretical validity of intellectual endeavor. I am suggesting, then, that there is nothing intrinsic to, say, an ethnographic account of Art Deco in Shanghai, Mexico City, and New York that makes it more compelling and relevant than, for instance, a critical study of caste and kinship in an Indian village. Requirements of research funding and of academic buzz

apart, in each case much depends on the questions posed, the truths unlearned, the concepts invoked, the verities undone, the categories evoked, and the narratives brought into play. Is it not the questions and concepts — and the unlearning of truths — that shape objects of inquiry, especially by unraveling (or ignoring) the relationships in which they are embedded? Is it not the categories and narratives — and the undoing of verities — that can lead to the objects (of a singular reason) being rendered as subjects (with different reasons)? Can practice, process, and power not be taken on board here? Extending the implications of these questions to the terms of the panel today, at stake is not only the questioning of pervasive presuppositions regarding the village but also the critical, cautious affirmation of the category-entity. Indeed, it is in this sense that I speak of the village not merely as an object of knowledge but as a condition of knowing.

The Indian village was extremely important for the mission project. It was here that the missionaries vested their millenarian hopes. It was here that they first learnt about conversion on the ground. Together, it was in the village that the evangelists readily, easily but also restlessly, uneasily braided together procedures of proselytization with protocols of civilization. Of course, a measure of contingency underlay the actual establishment of mission stations and Christian villages. When the missionary Oscar Lohr reached Raipur in 1868, he found a patron and an ally in Colonel Balmain, the Chief Commissioner of the Chhattisgarh region. The official advised the missionary to acquire a site for a mission station, informing him that a large tract of government wasteland comprising 1544 acres was about to be put up for public auction. This dovetailed neatly with Lohr's plans to begin his "work out in the district right in the middle of these people." Receiving financial help from Colonel Balmain, Lohr bought the land. The missionary named the place Bisrampur, the abode of rest. But the village was also the evangelist's space of labor. Within a few months, Lohr's family had moved into a bungalow with outhouses. The land included a deserted village called Ganeshpur. As part of the *malguzari* (village-proprietor) settlement initiated by the colonial regime in the 1860s, the missionary stood registered as the *malguzar* of Bisrampur and Ganeshpur. From the start, the missionary's temporal power came to reside in proprietary rights that extended to the forest in Bisrampur and Ganeshpur. The missionary was also the spiritual head of the Christian village and the mission station.

Lohr had established a precedent. At the beginning of the twentieth century, soon after evangelists of the American Mennonite Mission had made the town of Dhamtari their base of operations, they bought the village of Balodgahan. Here is how Sarah Lapp, spouse and co-worker of the missionary M. C. Lapp, described the purchase: "Agriculture being the leading occupation of the majority of India's people, it was only natural that the missionary thought of farming as the chief occupation of large

number of our Christian people. With this in view, efforts were made to purchase a village for this purpose. After much investigation ... the choice fell on Balodgahan... The village was seven miles south west of Dhamtari.” The somewhat “secular” note struck by this description was in keeping with the fact that, unlike Bistrampur, Balodgahan was never a purely Christian community, endeavoring instead to become a model economic village. Here, too, the missionary was the *malguzar* and the pastor, but the proprietary rights of the mission, acquired for 8000 rupees, extended to only 150 acres of the total 830 acres of Balodgahan. Of these 150 acres, 104 acres were for village grazing. Over the years the mission either got its own holdings cultivated by share-croppers or simply rented them for cash. In the latter case, the mission could keep back for a Widow’s Home and a Girl’s Orphanage in the village the share they wished to farm, receiving from them a fixed part of the produce. Rather than evicting middle and low caste as well as adivasi farmers, who were the vast majority in Balodgahan, the Mennonite mission followed the policy of buying land from them when it came up for sale and then selling it to members of the Christian community. By the late 1920s, there were around 30 Christian farmers in the village. All of this was in contrast to Bistrampur, where each Christian household had originally received four acres of land from the mission and where (also in late 1920s) a very large number of the 183 households were connected with farming. Indeed, Bistrampur and Balodgahan reveal distinct textures and ties of paternalism — as well as missionary discipline — that I hope to explore more fully in the paper I am gesturing at presently. The tending of crops and the shepherding of flocks are marked by dense histories, after all.

Bistrampur and Balodgahan make for interesting comparison if we equally track their shared linkages. The evangelists’ understandings of conversion are case in point. To be sure, there were differences between Lohr’s mid-nineteenth millenarianism and the Mennonites twentieth-century evangelism. Yet, I would suggest that some sense of a miraculous transformation on the horizon intermittently yet inexorably animated all evangelical endeavors in the spiritual wilderness of central India. If Lohr had his own mappings of the makeover, which must be deferred to the discussion, in the twentieth century the trope of “mass movement” found special favor among the missionaries. Unsurprisingly, the primary locus required for such transformations was village India, which was the citadel of caste.

The point is that the evangelical enterprise stood shaped by the interplay between contending yet overlapping conceptions of conversion. First, carried over from their past in the United States and alive amidst their present in India, the missionaries bore the burden of Pauline projections of conversion, themselves tied to varied visions of the solitary Saul seeing the light. Second, also bound to the life of the book, the Lord’s

miraculous powers of healing the sick continued to figure prominently in missionary accounts as compelling individuals to embrace Christianity. Third and finally, the evangelists' severally elaborated the theme of "natural" ties of kinship and caste as the basic building block for wide-ranging, collective transformations of faith. The interleaving and tensions between these conceptions of conversion lay at the core of the evangelical enterprise in Bistrampur and Balodgahan, finding shifting and shared configurations in the two villages. Such historical knots query knee-jerk notions of conversions and missionaries in contemporary India.

And what of the converts' side of the story, their translation of the missionary message and the Christian village in the making of an evangelical modernity? In rather different ways, the pasts of Bistrampur and Balodgahan reveal how bonds of kinship and ties of paternalism proved critical to the growth and consolidation of Christian congregations in central India. In both villages, the missionary was the *malguzar* and the pastor of these villages. If this obscured the division between temporal and spiritual authority for the Christians of Bistrampur, it allowed the Hindu inhabitants of Balodgahan to draw novel connections between ritual and power. At the same time, in each case, viewing the nature of authority through grids emphasizing the indissoluble links between ritual and power, the missionary as the pastor and the proprietor of the village could appear as *raja-log*, a king-like person. All this enables further elucidation of the nature of caste. I have argued earlier that purity/pollution and ritual kingship were not opposed principles but rather twin ritual schemes of meaning and power. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these schemes worked together with the forms of dominance derived from colonial governance to define patterns of power in the caste order. In necessarily distinct ways, an enquiry into Balodgahan and Bistrampur not only suggests that schemes of purity/pollution and cultural kingship, in modified and reworked ways, could shape the patterns, practices, and perceptions of Christian congregations. It also underscores how continuities and breaks with terms of caste and sect, mechanisms of incorporation and ostracism, and institutions of village life acquired new meanings through their rearrangement within regrouped communities.

In both Balodgahan and Bistrampur, the missionary preoccupation with monogamy and their fear of adultery meant that the converts were forbidden secondary marriages. Yet the converts consistently flouted missionary authority here, and continued to enter into secondary marriages. In the 1930s, the converts of Bistrampur drew upon missionary injunctions against adultery and the principles of maintenance of boundaries of groups, embedded within rules of caste and sect, to invoke the threat to the chastity of "virgin Christian sisters." They turned the honor of women into an evocative metaphor for order within the community, and a symbol that constituted its boundary. This community and its boundary articu-

lated a critical construction of the village. Although without expressing the village in such categorical ways, the converts of Balodgahan also defied their missionaries in fashioning their understanding of sexual transgression.

In both of these contexts, the converts' criticism and negotiation of missionary authority highlights their uses of Christianity, variously enacted through the recasting of evangelical idioms, nationalist rhetoric, and governmental enchantments. Elsewhere I have shown that a crucial initiative of the Bistrampur congregation in the 1930s entailed a pervasive "us" and "them", community and outsider divide. With the community formed around the converts of Bistrampur, all employees who did not originally belong to the mission station were termed as "outsiders." Protested forthwith was the increasing intrusion of these "outsiders" into the affairs of the community. Through grids emphasizing the inextricable ties between pastoral authority and landed power, the figure of the missionary was transformed from the benevolent mother-father of the past into an oppressive master of the present. Finally, the assertion of independence by the Bistrampur congregation involved a defense of the "paternalist" ties that had bound them to the missionaries through complex designs of dependence and control. Here, deference to the missionaries was one part self-preservation, and one part the calculated extraction of land, employment, and charity. The converts worked on missionary and nationalist rhetoric in their practice, construing their challenge to missionary authority in a Christian language, through idioms of an evangelical governmentality. While hardly as dramatic, the constituents of Balodgahan equally negotiated missionary authority, their quotidian enactments variously drawing on pastoral and ritual power. Together with the Euro-American evangelists, the Indian denizens of Bistrampur and Balodgahan articulated the terms and textures of empire, nation, and modernity.

