

Maran Buru Bonga - Satan Equation a Theological Crime

T. HEMBROM*

Christian preachers, in the past, in parts of the country in their zeal to preach 'good news' to the people of primal religion have ignorantly preached serious 'bad news'. They have unfortunately borne out more 'false witness' against the primal religion than true witness to it. The unfortunate tragedy is that even at the fag end of the twentieth century their Christians still enjoy 'bearing false witness' against the people of primal religions in the hope of spreading 'good news' to them. The Excruciating question is - can anyone succeed in spreading 'good news' by bearing 'false witness' against his/her neighbours' faith? The question in hand is the equation of the emissary the *Maran Buru Bonga* of the creator God *Thakur Jiv* to the early mankind in the Santal creation narrative with the biblical Satan.

The early missionaries to the Santals, armed with medieval Christian theology, did identify Satan with the *Maran Buru Bonga* of the Santals.¹ The trend continues with the present days' native Christians, who, on the authority of the missionaries' writings that were written without finding out facts, build up Christian demonology saying that the *Maran Buru Bonga* of the Santal creation tradition is the counterpart of the Christians Satan/Devil/Diabolos.² They do not realise that theological judgement passed without finding facts vitiates the environment. One can only appeal to them to go deeper into the tradition of the Santals to find out facts and to examine the sustainability of the equation.

The Santali term *Bonga* is a generic term and connotes an invisible supernatural spiritual force/power. The term *Bonga* in itself does not connote anything good or bad unless preceded by a qualifying adjective. The term may be considered

*Rev. Dr. T. Hembrom teaches Old Testament at the Bishop's College, Calcutta.

equivalent to the English word 'spirit' which also is specified by an adjective preceding it either to connote good or evil.

From the existing literatures of the early missionaries, who worked among the Santals, it becomes evident that the term *Bonga* presented a confusion to them. In a land of idols, temples, shrines, holy mountains, holy rivers and holy animals, the missionaries in the late nineteenth century suddenly came across a people, the Santals, who had no idols, no temples, no shrines, no holy places, no holy mountains, no holy rivers and no holy animals. The missionaries' first reaction to this people was that they had discovered an irreligious people completely devoid of the knowledge of God and his grace. To them these people seemed to revere *Bongas* and at the same time they were mortally afraid of these *Bongas*. This religious phenomenon of the people was unparalleled in the experiences of the missionaries. They had no analogy to understand this phenomenon. To understand the religious belief of this people, help was sought in the religious phenomenon of the more advanced people in the land, namely in Hinduism. The exact analogy for the Santals' belief in *Bonga*, which is without idol, temple and shrine was not found there. From some mythological writings, references to spiritual supernatural beings, which were dreaded by people such as *bhut*, *churin*, *rakshasa* etc. were found, and it is possible that the early missionaries took the attributes of these Hindu mythological evil spiritual forces hostile to mankind and attributed them as a whole to the *Bongas* of the Santals. Failing to treat the religion of the Santals as a distinct religion and their concept of *Bonga* as a distinct concept, the missionaries concluded:

*Bongas are without exception all malevolent
and the enemies of men, they can work only evil,
that they harass humanity and are the cause of
sickness and death resulting from evil.*³

And the climax of it all, they identified the greatest *Bonga* of the Santals' faith, the *Maran Buru Bonga* with Satan/devil/diabolos of the Christian faith. Here began the one sided act of 'bearing false witness' against the primal religion of the Santals, and it potentially closed down ways of all dialogues between the primal religion of the Santals and Christianity.

Armed with this contextualised demonology of vilifying others' deities for no reason, Christian missionaries of all denominations since 1862 till today have toiled among the Santals; but only four to five percent of the total population of about six millions Santals have accepted Christianity.

Protest Voiced

The facilities to general education for general Santals were made available after the independence of the country. By the seventies many Santals could read Santali Christian literature. When they found that their greatest *Bonga*, the *Maran Buru Bonga* had been identified with Satan/devil/diabolos of the Christian faith in the Santali Christian Hymn-books and other literature, they protested. Subsequently the Santal Christians deleted identification of the *Maran Buru* with Satan/devil/diabolos from their subsequent editions of hymn-books and from other Santali Christian writings. But they have not been able to blot the obsession for the *Maran Buru*-Satan equation out of their mind as is evident from some of their recent writings.⁴

Meaning of Bonga and the Maran Buru Bonga

The *Maran Buru Bonga* is one of the revered national Bongas of the Santals. In short he is only called *Maran Buru*. On all festival days he is revered along with *Jaher Era Bonga*, *Gosae Era Bonga*, and *Moreko-Turuiko Bonga* at the sacred grove, the *Jaher Than* of every Santal village by the village priest, the *Naeke*. Recent studies⁵ on the *Bongas* of the primal religion of the Santals have shown that all *Bongas* are not spiteful. *Maran Buru Bonga*, *Jaher Era Bonga*, *Gosae Era Bonga*, *Moreko Turuiko Bonga*, *Abge Bonga*, *Manjhi haram Bonga*, *Pargana Bonga* are intimately related with the integrity and welfare of human beings. Santals do believe that there are evil *Bongas* also. But good *Bongas* and evil *Bongas* do not have different names. They are distinguished and particularised by appropriate qualifying adjectives preceding the term *Bonga*.

In the tradition of the Santals, *Maran Buru Bonga*, *Jaher era Bonga* and *Gosae Era Bonga* are the national *Bongas* of the Santals. Their creation tradition (Campbell's version)⁶ shows that they are supernatural eternal spiritual beings, who co-exist with the supreme God *Thakur Jiv* and that they work under his instructions, and that all these national *Bongas* under *Thakur Jiv's* supervision have contributed to the creation of the world and humankind. The Santals do not have a theogony just as the Bible does not have it. Both the Santals' creation traditions and the biblical creation traditions take the existence of supernatural eternal beings for granted. And just as the Santals do not believe in a lonely God so also the Bible does not believe in a lonely God living in isolation. On the contrary, as in the Santals' tradition, he is also believed to be surrounded by other supernatural spiritual eternal being (cf. Gen. 1: 26-27; 3:22; 11:7; 2 Kings. 22:19ff.; Is.6:1f.; Job 1:6ff.).

Reasons for reverence for *Maran Buru Bonga* in the Santals' tradition

Among the national *Bongas* of the Santals the *Maran Buru Bonga* is the greatest of all the *Bongas*. Here the phrase *Maran Buru* is a superlative adjective for a *Bonga* showing him to be the greatest *Bonga*. His personal name is *Lita*.⁷ He is considered to be the greatest, because of his contributions to early humankind. In the creation narrative of the Santals⁸ the *Maran Buru Bonga* is the emissary of the creator God *Thakur Jiv* to the early human beings, whom *Thakur Jiv* had allowed to be born of two eggs of a single parent birds, *Has* and *Hasil*. When the first human beings were born of the two eggs of the birds, *Thakur Jiv* appointed the *Maran Buru Bonga* to be their guardian and was entrusted with the task of bringing the children up as human beings should be. The tradition further tells us that the *Maran Buru Bonga* helped the birds in feeding the children. When the children grew up he taught them the art of carpentry, animal husbandry, the art of agriculture, home science, hygiene and the offering of the first fruits to the creator God, *Thakur Jiv*. When they reached

adulthood he led the early man and woman into the union of marriage to ensure the continuity of humanity in this world. In this respect, the *Maran Buru Bonga* did exactly the same as the creator God of the Bible *Elohim* did through a blessing to the early man and woman "... be fruitful and multiply..." (Gen.1:28). On this blessing Zimmerli has remarked:

Old Testament faith is ever conscious that this imperative represents fertility and the power to procreate not as something fated to occur, but as something to which man (humankind) must give an approving 'yes'. The man (humankind) in the Old Testament takes it for granted, and quite soberly, that he/(she) is called to marriage, to a life of sexual union between husband and wife. The idea that celibacy, abstention from marriage, could be something spiritually loftier drawing man (humankind) closer to God, is foreign to the Old Testament.⁹ (words in brackets are the present author's).

***Maran Buru* finds no analogy with the biblical Satan**

The activities of the *Maran Buru Bonga* to early humanity does not find any analogy with Satan/devil/diabolos of the Bible as is clear from the above evidences. Then what justification do we have in identifying the *Maran Buru Bonga* of the Santals' faith with Satan of the Christian faith?

Some Christian missionaries¹⁰ dealing with the Santals' creation tradition have considered the act of the *Maran Buru Bonga* leading early man and woman into consummation of the marriage union as an evil act, *baric' kami*. Ludicrous. For nowhere in the world sexual relationship between husband and wife is considered *baric' kami*, sinful deed. Christian themselves do not consider a sexual relationship between husband and wife as something sinful. See above what Zimmerli has said in this regard. The Santals consider the sexual union between wife and husband as a gift of God for procreation and happy living in a family.

Of course, the Santals do not contract marriage between brothers and sisters, between the same sects and close relatives. The early man and woman were brother and sister

having been born of one single parent birds' eggs. But since there were no other human beings in the world the *Maran Buru Bonga* had to unite them in a marriage bond. It was a challenge for the *Maran Buru Bonga*, a compulsion of necessity, a noble task to induce the process of procreation through them, the process of actualizing the blessing 'be fruitful and multiply' (Gen. 1:28). To legalize this marriage the *Maran Buru Bonga* had to make use of the intoxicant *handi* or the rice beer. (Here the case is not like that of what was done to Lot to obtain procreation, Gen. 19:30ff).

Here in this situation, to unite them into a marriage union was, a perfectly noble act of the *Maran Buru Bonga*, for which we can assume that he had the approval of *Thakur Jiv*, for the Santal creation tradition tells us that the associates of *Thakur Jiv*, the lower supernatural beings do not do anything without his blessing or *bhor*¹¹. For this noble act of instituting marriage union of the early man and woman should the *Maran Buru Bonga* be equated with Satan of the Christian faith?

The above analysis of the activities of the *Maran Buru Bonga* of the Santal tradition to early humanity shows that there is no clear analogy to his act in the Bible that would permit one to identify him with the biblical Satan. The analogy between these two supernatural beings of these two distant traditions can be shown only through mutation and manipulation of the Santal creation tradition as it has been done in the *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak' Katha*.¹² This version is laden with dualism, which Santals never believed. In this version the *Maran Buru Bonga* enters the scene out of the blue, and teaches the early man and woman how to brew rice beer, *handi*, and asks them to pour a libation to him before he makes them to drink it, signifying that he deceived them to worship him¹³. But in Campbell's version¹⁴ it was the *Maran Buru Bonga* himself who poured out the libation of the rice beer and then made them drink it. The present author has serious doubt about the authenticity of the creation tradition as presented in the *Horkoren Mare Hapramko Reak' Katha*.¹⁵ Granted that the version is correct, then where do we get a parallel to this act in the Bible to prove that Satan deceived early man and woman to worship him?

One may draw the analogy of the deception theory for the alienation of humankind from the story of the garden of Eden in Gen Chapter 3. But here also the serpent- Satan equation is exegetically impossible. Here it is clearly stated that the serpent was one of the creatures that the Lord God had made, Gen.3:1. The serpent of this episode is nowhere identified with Satan in the Bible. There is a reference in the Bible to the defeat 'of a dragon, the ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (Rev. 12:9, 20:2). This ancient serpent must be from some other tradition, not from the garden of Eden, it is probably from Is. 27:1. The ancient serpent to be vanquished in the book of Revelation cannot be identified with the serpent of the garden of Eden. For the serpent of the garden of Eden received its due punishment for its deed immediately (Gen.3:14-15). That the Satan entered the serpent of the garden episode is nowhere stated in the Bible. Therefore, the *Maran Buru Bonga* and Satan equation via the serpent of the garden of Eden to uphold the deception theory of alienation from God also, is an inadequate analogy to victimize the *Maran Buru Bonga* as deceiver of early humankind.

Unbiblical understanding of Satan

Popular Christian understanding of Satan prevailing among Santal Christians, presumably taught by their missionaries, is mostly un-biblical. We cite one instance which is taught in response to a question "Have the Santals been alienated from God?" And the response follows:

*Hē, Hor hoponko do goc' hor rútumte ar nūr akan serma godetko, metak'me Maran Buru Soetantekoko sewa agu akawat'koa, ar Isorre botor banuk'takote emanteak' baric' kai losot'reko jobe akana.*¹⁶

Yes, since the Santals have been worshipping in the name of the dead (persons) and since they worship the fallen angels, namely *Maran Buru* Satan and others, and since they have no fear of God, they wallow in the mud of various unpleasant sins.

Every statement made in the above quotation is false. The Santals do not worship in the name of the dead nor do they worship fallen angels. The identification of *Maran Buru* with fallen angels is malicious and annoying. The fallen angel theory of the Christians for the origin of Satan is not known in the Bible either. Is. 14:12 is a taunt song by the prophet for the overthrow of Babylonian imperial power.¹⁷ In fact the Old testament did not know of any power working independently as God's adversary, 'the source of evil is religion opposed to Israel'.¹⁸ In the New Testament also we do not have the fallen angel theory for the origin of Satan. In Luke 10:18 Jesus seeing Satan fall like lightning from heaven is an expression of an ecstatic vision, expressing that his power over evil dethrones the forces of evil and brings in a new age.¹⁹ This passage does not speak of the origin of Satan as a fallen angel. In Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:11 there are references to rebellious angels, but they are vanquished and kept imprisoned. In Rev. 12:7-9 the defeat of the Devil and Satan with their associates, and then to be thrown down from heaven also, does not speak of the origin of Satan as a fallen angel, it just confirms his existence in heaven. The fallen angel theory of the origin of Satan taught to the Santal Christians is extra biblical. In this case how mischievous it would be for Christians to equate The *Maran Buru Bonga* with the fallen angel Satan?

In the Creation Narrative of the Holy Koran we have clear indication of a rebellious angel, who became an adversary of God. We read in Sura 7:11-18 the following

11. And we created you, then we fashioned you, then told the angels: fall ye prostrate before Adam! And they fall prostrate, all save Iblis, who was not of those who make prostration.
12. He said : What hindered thee that thou didst not fall prostrate when I bade thee? (Iblis) said: I am better than him. Thou createdst me of fire while him thou didst create of mud.
13. He said : Then go down hence! It is not for thee to show pride here, so go forth! Lo! thou art of those degraded.
14. He said : Reprieve me till the day when they are raised (from the dead).

15. He said : Lo! thou art of those reprieved.
16. He said : Now because thou hast sent me astray, verily I shall lurk in ambush for them on Thy Right Path.
17. Then I shall come upon them from before them and from behind them and from their right hands and from their left hands, and thou wilt not find most of them beholden(unto thee).
18. He said : Go forth from hence, degraded, banished. As for such of them as follow thee, surely I will fill hell with all of you.
(Quoted from Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, Tr., *The Meaning of the Holy Quran*, Universal Book Stall, New Delhi, n.d.,pp.122-23)

Christian Preachers may easily draw somekind of analogy between Iblis and Satan of their faith. But why drag the *Maran Buru Bonga* of the Santals' creation tradition into this analogy? In the creation tradition of the Santals the *Maran Buru Bonga* has been shown as completely obedient to the creator God *Thakur Jiv*. As an emissary of *Thakur Jiv* to early human beings, he has performed his task with success in educating the early human beings in the basic arts of survival and how to live in communion with *Thakur Jiv*. We can assume that in subsequent human history the creator God has continued to use him amid different situations of humankind in various ways for the welfare and survival of humankind.

If anyone desires to draw an analogy of the *Maran Buru Bonga* with any supernatural spiritual being in the New Testament, then he can easily be compared with the angel who brought the message to Joseph (Math. 1:20) and to Mary (Lk. 1:26ff) concerning the birth of Jesus, or with the angel who brought the message to Zechariah (Lk.1:11) of the birth of John the baptist, or with the angel Michael who fights evil spiritual beings in heaven and drives them out of heaven (Rev. 12:7f.). In fact the *Maran Buru Bonga* of the Santals' creation tradition can find an analogy with any of the angels in the Bible who is intimately associated with the integrity and welfare of human beings, but in no way with the Satan of the Christian faith.

Knowledge of Alienation from God

The alienation of humankind from God is known to the Santals. But unlike the Christian faith, they do not put the blame for this alienation from God on any invisible supernatural spiritual force. They hold humankind itself responsible for this alienation. Their simple thought on alienation from God is comparable with one school of thought in the Old Testament, which says "... every imagination of the thought of his (human's) heart was only evil continually (Gen. 6:5b,J.). That humankind is alienated from God is expressed in the Santals' tradition of the devastation of the first human generation at *Khoj Kaman* in which only one pair of humans who had found favour with *Thakur Jiv* survived the devastation."

In the Santals' tradition of the devastation of the first human generation we are told that at *Khoj Kaman* the first generation of humankind became very wicked in the sight of the creator God, *Thakur Jiv*. They became like beasts not recognising one another's rights and duties. (Note that the sin referred to here is moral and ethical and not cultic). *Thakur Jiv* called them back to himself to follow his paths set for them. But they would not return to him. Eventually, frustrated with them, he destroyed all of them except one pair, with fire from heaven.²⁰

This tradition shows that the Santals share the belief with Judeo-Christians that humankind has been alienated from God and that God wants them to live morally and ethically in obedience to him. But they sharply differ from the Christian understanding of alienation from God in the sense that the Santals do not hold any invisible spiritual supernatural being known to them responsible for this alienation as the Christians do. And therefore, the Santals would not appreciate to be taught by the Christians that it was their *Maran Buru Bonga* who has alienated them from God.

Inflicting insults to others' revered deities without finding out the facts is unchristian and injurious to Christian mission. It is arrogance and not service. This kind of Christian theology is better called a demonology of villifying others' faith because, without finding out the facts which prevail among the tribals,

Christians of the Jharkhand region have antagonised the general Jharkhand tribes. Their aspersions on primal religions has helped the "Lotus" to blossom rapidly in recent years in that region-predominantly inhabited by tribals and Dalits. The Satan- *Maran Buru Bonga* equation is not a contextualised Christian theology. It is a wrongly attempted contextual Christian demonology based on imaginary data. This kind of contextualized Christian demonology will only fan the flames of hatred and distrust already existing between tribal Christians and the tribals of the primal faith. To build up a harmonious human community with love and justice is the goal of the gospel, expressed by the phrase 'the kingdom of God/heaven' with which Jesus began to preach. The need of the hour is to build up a contextual theology for attaining a harmonious community life to obliterate Christian tribal and primal tribal hostility.

References

1. Vide, P.O. Bodding, *Kuk'li Puthi*, Lucknow, Santal Mission of the Northern Churches, 1955, p.41
Goha Puthi I His, Benagaria, the Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1967, p.27
2. Stephen Murmu, 'Understanding the Concept of God in Santal Tradition Myth' in *Indian Journal of Theology*, 38/1, 1996, pp.81,86.
3. P.O. Bodding, *Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore*, Calcutta, The Asiatic Society, 1986 (Reprint), pp.1-2
4. Vide, Stephen Murmu, *op.cit.*, pp.72-86
5. J. Troisi, *Tribal Religion: Religious Beliefs and Practices Among the Santals*, Delhi, Manohar publication, 1978, p.78
T. Hembrom, *The Santals: Anthropological Theological Reflections on Santali and Biblical Creation Traditions*, Calcutta, Punthi Pustak, 1996, pp.36-40
6. Rev. A. Campbell, "Santal Traditions" in *Indian Evangelical Review*, Vol. IX, No. 73, 1892, pp.1-13, the tradition can be seen in T. Hembrom, *op.cit.*, pp.88-94
7. P.O. Bodding, *A Santali Dictionary*, Vol. IV, Oslo, Det Norske Videnskaps Akademi, 1936, pp.144, 233
8. Rev. A. Campbell, *op.cit.*, pp.1-13, T. Hembrom, *op.cit.*, pp.90ff.
9. Walther Zimmerli, *Man and His Hope in the Old Testament*, London, SCM Press, 1968, p31
10. W.J. Culshaw, *Tribal Heritage: A Study of the Santal*, London, Butterworth Press, 1956, pp. 65-66, cf, Stephen Murmu, *op.cit.* p.86
11. T. Hembrom, *op. cit.*, pp. 88,107

12. *Ibid.*, p.100
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 91
15. *Ibid.*, pp.99-101
16. P.O. Bodding, *Kuk'li Puthi, op.cit.* pp. 21,38
17. Frederick L. Morialrly, S.J., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (ed.) Raymond E. Brown, Theological Publication in India, Bangalore, 1968, p.274
18. C. Westermann, *Genesis:1-11*, London, SPCK., 1984, pp. 238-239.
19. S. Maclean Gilmour, St. Luke' in *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, N.Y., Abingdon Press, 1952, p.189
20. Umashankar, *Santal Sanskar Ki Ruprekha*, Kadamkuan, Patna, Nirman Prakashan, 1944, pp.138 ff.