

INDIA

SOREN, SAGRAM SANTOSH KUMAR, Compiler. *Santalia: Catalogue of Santali Manuscripts in Oslo*. NIAS Reports, No. 41. Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1999. x + 180 pages. Bibliography, index. Paper US\$19.95; £14.99; ISBN 87-87062-73-9.

It is widely accepted that apart from spreading Christianity, missionaries in India were engaged in educating the people at the grass roots, imparting vocational training, and setting up institutions for medical care. The Christian Mission in Bengal (a state in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent) worked closely among the tribal people. One of the largest tribal communities in Bengal was, and still is, the Santal. The Teacher's Training

Institute was established in 1863 with the intention of imparting education in the Santals' mother tongue. Santals initially had no script and Puxley pioneered the writing of Santali in Roman characters. Over time, the participation of Santals in the missionaries' educational programs gained momentum. Imparting education and other philanthropic activities served as a powerful means of initiating conversion on a large scale. About seventy years ago, Santals developed their own script known as Olchiki, which consists of thirty characters. Primarily academics, intellectuals, and humanists have rigorously debated the role of missionaries in India, particularly within tribal communities. Even the harshest critics, however, agree that missionaries deserve credit for documenting tribal languages, customs, and traditions. Systematic documentation prior to the advent of missionaries in tribal areas was lacking.

It is against this background that this catalogue of Santali manuscripts in Oslo may be all the more appreciated because it brings together the literary contributions of the missionary Rev. Paul Olaf Bodding, who stayed in Santal Parganas (a district in West Bengal that is thickly populated by Santals) for more than thirty years. Soren clearly explains how over this period of close association with Santals, Bodding documented their history, language, rites and rituals, myths and lores, and indigenous methods of treatment of illness, in addition to acting as the local medical practitioner. When Bodding passed away, Mrs. Christine Bodding handed over the collection of manuscripts to the Oslo University Library where they are available for reference. It is unfortunate that the wealth of information about Santal society and culture was transferred from their own soil to a distant land. Many Santals will be unable to access this information in their lifetime, although the catalogue will reach those to whom the manuscripts will not be available. Several of the manuscripts have been published while others still await publication. Those who are unable to read the manuscripts will at least get a sense of the major themes by looking at the catalogue.

Compiling a catalogue is a formidable task in itself, and Soren has compiled it with great passion and perseverance. The difficulties inherent become compounded when the collection is divided into several overlapping themes like those developed by Bodding. In the Introduction itself, Soren presents a comprehensive account of missionary initiatives in Santal society. More interestingly, he has brought out Bodding's method of building the vast, diverse, yet precise collection with intensive input from the local people. At the outset, Bodding asked a Santal who was well informed of the language and culture to write down all the stories he knew. Later, he invited eleven other Santals to contribute their knowledge. The names of the contributors are mentioned in the Introduction. Soren does well to do so because it is the active involvement of Santals themselves that lends credibility to the data presented in the manuscripts.

The manuscripts are categorized into collections. Each collection is classified (Ms8^o 1448—MS 8^o 1451, Ms 4^o 1469, Ms Fol. 1684—Ms. Fol. 1687, Ms. Fol. 1943, Ms 54). The collections are divided into several volumes that are constituted of specific titles of manuscripts. An introductory note that describes the major themes that the collection deals with precedes the list of manuscripts in each collection. A careful reading of the introductory notes of all the collections reveals that, among others, the folk tale is one theme that is found in a number of the collections.

Cataloguing manuscripts by collection and title can be tedious for researchers because they are required to know the contents of each collection in order to retrieve information. A four-digit number is assigned to each manuscript. The four-digit numbers of manuscripts run consecutively throughout the catalogue. Soren's ingenuity lies in mentioning the themes (e.g., agriculture, cosmogony, folk tales, women) against each manu-

script that appears in the collections. The themes are alphabetically arranged in the index at the end of the book. The four-digit numbers assigned to manuscripts are put together under the relevant theme. In doing this, Soren places all the manuscripts that deal with a common theme together. Naturally, manuscripts that deal with many themes are included in more than one place in the index. Inter-collection referencing of manuscripts (retrievable by their four-digit numbers) in the index facilitates information retrieval.

This slim book will be of much use to those accessing Bodding's manuscripts in Oslo as also those who seek to learn the ways and means of preparing researcher-friendly catalogues.

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