

Tone Bleie, *A New Testament. Scandinavian Missionaries and Santal Chiefs from Company and British Crown Rule to Independence*, Oslo: Solum, Bokvennen, 2023, 528 p., 499 NOK, ISBN: 978-82-560-2873-3

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Anthropologist and professor at the University of Tromsø, Tone Bleie, has written *A New Testament*, a book that in many ways differs from traditional accounts of the Norwegian-Danish missionary organization Santal Mission and its work among the Santal people and other tribal communities in India and Bangladesh during the 19th and 20th centuries. Unlike a conventional historical biography or organizational history, this book is structured thematically rather than chronologically and applies a theoretical framework that incorporates concepts such as the Atlantic world, transnational history, early globalization, and collective memory.

Through its focus on the Santal Mission, *A New Testament* examines the peak and development of modern Protestant world missions. The pioneers of the Santal Mission came from Norway, Denmark, Prussia, and North America, and many of the missionaries involved were later also sent to South Africa and China. In this way, the gospel was spread not only among the Santals but also in Norway, Denmark, England, and North America, as traveling missionaries connected Christianity in Santalistan with church life in these regions. Now, the Santal tribes lived in the so-called Western jungle Mahals and were ruled by chiefs never reduced to submission by the Mughals. The Santals practiced a slash and burn cultivation, and migrated to new settlements within a few years succession, planting and harvesting rice and other crops. In the early colonial period, Santals were found in Birbhum, Midnapur and Singhbhum, in small patches of cultivation in the forest clearings. The Santals have their own religion, customs, and rituals and differ considerably from that of the Hindus. They clearly formed a distinct group with an ethnic consciousness and is not a product of colonial encounter.

The Permanent Settlement of Bengal in 1793 was an agreement between the East Indian Company and the landlords of Bengal. The law opened the jungle areas to outsiders and started an infringement on the right of Adivasi tribes including the Santals in the forest areas. According to the act, zamindars and chiefs were to collect tax revenues but found it

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hard to do during times of drought around the year 1800. In the jungle Mahals, several rebellions took place in the first half of the 19th century, and sepoy troops burnt a number of villages in the region, forcing the population to withdraw to the jungle. With the new laws, the Santals were left exposed to the zamindars as well as settlers claim for payment for forest products. Thus, the Santals found themselves increasingly excluded from the revenue system. Creating individual property and responsibility for revenue, the colonial system worsened the situation for tribal cultivators. The redistribution of traditional Santal lands, collectively owned and used, to plains people took place in the 1830's, and fueled resentment among the tribes. At the same time, the tribes experienced discrimination from their Hindu neighbours and now land owners, who saw them below the untouchables.

The first half of the 19th century witnessed a period of intense Evangelical Christian (combined with secular Utilitarian) influence on British imperial policy. In 1854, the CMS missionary E. Droese started work among the Santals of the Rahmahal Hills. After the 'Mutiny' of 1857, which was interpreted widely as a religious reaction from Indians, there was a considerable shift in colonial politics which led to a settled policy of non-interference in religion. But again, the case among the Santals was different as the CMS missionaries returned already in 1861, and now with a demand for Santal education. When the Danish-Norwegian missionaries Skrefsrud and Børrensen arrived in 1865, the Santals were in a dire situation but also saw a link between writing and power, something which the missionaries could provide. The link between education and literacy was explored by the missionaries, and the idea was promoted that education prevented insurrection which was seen as based on ignorance and prejudice against Western modernity. And of course, education would lead to – and proceed – conversion.

The book is divided into four main sections: the context of Scandinavian-Asian mission work; Christianity as practiced at mission stations; the history and transition of the organization; and the missionary movement's museum period. As the book is not a historical account in itself, it presupposes a certain familiarity with modern Protestant mission history, the history of the Santal Mission, and the cultural and religious world of the Santals tribal in the Bengal jungle. Some chapters provide deeper insight into the key figures' stories, ambitions, and theological perspectives – especially Chapter 10, which discusses views on women and gender ideals in the mission, challenging pietistic moral standards. These

chapters stand out as some of the strongest parts of the book. Additionally, the book includes a chronological overview and an extensive bibliography covering nearly everything written on the Santal Mission.

The book aligns with recent decades' theoretical trends, viewing international Protestant missions as part of the broader history of globalization and world history. A key argument is that modern Protestant world missions became possible in the 19th and 20th centuries due to political, economic, and technological developments, which, for the first time, enabled independent church missionary organizations to send missionaries to places such as the Indian subcontinent. Motivated by pietistic Lutheran theology, the mission became feasible when India opened to Christian missionaries after transitioning from company rule to a British Crown colony in 1858. Moreover, the mission was financially sustained through numerous individuals who contributed donations in the sending congregations through the home base of the mission society.

Thus, the book serves as a corrective to the oversimplified critique of modern Protestant mission as cultural imperialism or merely an extension of colonial spiritual power. Bleie argues that such criticism deprives the Santals of agency in their own history and makes it difficult to understand the Santal Mission's success. Christian mission interacted with tribal politics, economic development, and the Santals' desire for greater self-determination—whether in relation to traditional landowners (zamindars), the British colonial authorities, or the new political elite in independent India after 1947.

The book's strength lies in its detailed weaving of mission history into the broader global historical context, providing contemporary relevance. However, this strength also presents a weakness: the overarching theoretical framework is less robust than it would be in a purely historical account or a more theoretical discussion. Bleie herself describes her method as a 'weaving,' where the individual threads consist of people, buildings, archives, court cases, and organizations. As a whole, the book presents a cohesive historical narrative of the Santal Mission as a lens on early globalization. Yet, each chapter also stands as an independent article that can be read separately. Like a piece of fabric, there is no fixed starting or ending point for the argument, making it easy to navigate the book but also somewhat weakening its theoretical ambitions.

The book is therefore recommended to readers interested in Protestant mission history, mission societies, as well as globalization history. It offers a fresh perspective on the interplay between Scandinavian missionaries and the Santal people in the spread of Lutheran Christianity.