

# Suppression of Meriah Sacrifice Among Khond Tribe in Kandhamal: A Study

## Abstract

The region Kandhamal is one of the backward district of Odisha where the evil custom of Mariah sacrifice (human sacrifice) was prevalent during the British administration. This system was widely prevalent in the regions. After British administration under took the region they got to know about the evil custom and try to stop the inhuman activity of the tribe of the region. The Christian missionaries were helped lot to stop this evil custom.

**Keywords:** Meriah, Human Sacrifice, Kondhs, Taluq, Victim, Christian Missionaries.

## Introduction

The practice of human sacrifice was prevalent among many hill tribe of Odisha, among them Kandhs of Kandhamal was not exception to it. It is very difficult to find out the real beginning of this inhuman practice<sup>1</sup>. Kandhamal situated in the south western district of modern Odisha. It was a northern part district of the Madras Presidency and some part of district was also fall under the Bengal Presidency. Infected the idea of human sacrifice had influenced most of the tribal region of the state and it played a pre-dominant role in the life and culture of the tribal people<sup>2</sup>. The Rajas and zamindars who had their headquarters in the plains. They used to offer human sacrifice to the deities they worshiped. The religious practice was not only confirmed within the aboriginals but also it touched the relatively more civilized people who had come in contact with this hill people.<sup>3</sup>

The Kandhamal region of modern Odisha was a part of the Ganjam district during the British crown. Though Ganjam was occupied by British on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1766 A. D., but Kandhamal hill region was untouched until 1835-36 A.D. The Ghumusur region was occupied on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1835 A.D the capital of Ghumusur. Kullada was taken possession of on the 9<sup>th</sup> but the arrival of the troops at Galleri, the adherents of Zamidar's opened fire upon the camp and oppose their progress. Dhanajaya Bhanja the ruler was fled away into the Maliahs at the commencement of the operations and died there at the end of the 1835. Then the Ganjam collector occupied the Ghumusur and control the region. The Britisher knew the reality of Kandhamal. They made their first knowledge with the Kandhamal people and their society, religion and antiquity. The Meriah sacrifice was existed in the South Odisha, particularly in the Kandhamal which was barbarous in nature.

The people of the Kandhamal were primitive to a degree and practiced the Meriah or human sacrifice. It was gradually suppressed by the British, side by side the missionaries took a very important role in the suppression such like inhuman practice in Kandhamal region. In this article a study has been made to discuss the different aspects of Meriah sacrifice prevalent in this region.

## Aim of the Study

The aim of paper is to find the various reforming steps taken by the British Government. Many Mariah victims were rescued and bring to the lime light of the society. The Christian Missionaries were taking very leading role to suppress of the human sacrifice among the Kondhs of Kandhamal district in Odisha. The superstitious believe of the tribe is eradicated through good deed of the British as well as the Christian Missionaries.

## Discovery of Meriah Sacrifice

The British discovered the Meriah sacrifice after their occupation of Ghumusur region. Mr. Russell<sup>4</sup> the senior member of the Board of Revenue of the Madras Presidency was the first person who brought to light the prevalence of the Meriah Sacrifice in Kandhamal. He brought to the notice of the government in his first report on the affairs of Ghumusur dated on 12<sup>th</sup> August 1836.<sup>5</sup> Consequently Samuel Charter Macpherson of the Madras army was appointed during survey the Kandhamal to



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brought the existence of Meriah Sacrifice to the notice of the British government in 1836.<sup>6</sup> According to Lieutenant Hills reports, Meriah sacrifice was prevalent in many places of Odisha including Kandhamal. These places are in Jeypur, Bastor, Chinnakimindy, Ghumusur, Boud, Sonpur, and Dasapalla<sup>7</sup>. Infact, the meriah practice had been prevalent in the whole range of tribal region. However, there is nothing known to the outer world. From 1836 to 1861, the British government had made continuous efforts for the suppression of human or meriah sacrifice. Finally they had succeeded in their effort. They have taken more then 17 years to stop such inhuman practice. In the mean while the Christian missionaries were taking leading role in the suppression of the Meriah sacrifice.

### Suppression of Sacrifice

It is very hard steps to suppress the Meriah sacrifice for the British Government. Because the sacrifice had became related to its socio-religious thoughts. It was became a national institution among the tribals of south Odisha particularly among the Kandh tribe of Kandhamal district. The Government of Madras as well as Bengal Presidency took an important step to suppress such barbarous practice. They appointed many officers to suppress such practice. The following are the names of the various officers who contributed to the suppression of the Meriah sacrifices through out the hill tracts of Ganjam and Odisha between 1845 and 1861, viz. : Captain Macpherson, Dr. Candenhead, Dr. Pinkey, Captain Frey, Colonel Campbell, Captain MacVicar, Captain McNeill, and Lieutenant Crawford.<sup>8</sup> The Meriah Agency was especially more success to highlighting the manners and customs of the tribals in Kandhamal<sup>9</sup>. The meriah sacrifice was widely practiced in Kandhamal of Ghumusur and the neighboring region of Boud and Dasapalla region of Bengal presidency. The Government of India accepted the need for united action throughout the Kandhamal region especially inhabited by the Kandh tribe. Hence in September 1845, the Government of India created a new establishment to deal with the problems of the tribals. To control over the meriah region, government had passed an Act, XXI of 1845 to create an Agent to the Governor General of India whose main duty was to suppress the rite of meriah and also female infanticide. They called as the Meriah Agent or the Hill Agent<sup>10</sup>. We may divide the total period of Meriah suppression into four phase.

The British government had started their first operation to suppress the Meriah sacrifice in Ghumsur region in 1837. Ghumusur taluq had consists of two Zamindar's viz., Ghumusur and Surada which were taken away by British Government after the Ghumusur Rebellion of 1836.<sup>11</sup> The present Kandhamal is lying in both the Zamindaris. Probably the meriah sacrifice was mostly prevalent in Kandhamal. So they started first to detect the sacrifice in this region.

In the year 1837 the two British officers named Captain Miller and Stevenson were stationed at Ghumusur. Mr. Miller had tactfully rescued no less then twelve victims at Coopauty in Gullery. Stevenson had rescued seventeen Meriah children among them

one girl has been escaped<sup>12</sup>. Mr. Russell is the pioneer operation of Meriah sacrifice in Ghumusur.

In the end of the 1837 another young British officer was working in the operation. He has named as John Campbell who had been the secretary of Russell and assisted during the military operation in Ghumusur. After obtaining the charge, Campbell commenced his operation in December 1837. He started with the inviting of an assembly of chiefs and leaders of Kandhamal region. In the assembly John Campbell could discover the most influential chief of Kandhamal. He was Sham Bissoi whose cooperation Campbell could win. Another chief was Punda Naik, they act as a interpreter of Campbell<sup>13</sup>. For the kind and friendly behave of Captain Campbell towards the tribes and inspired them the good hope of rays for their future. On the other side their persistence in the practice might expose them to the danger of the conflict with the Government. His address had significantly impact on the chiefs and their followers. Again for second time Campbell invites the chiefs to assembled. At that meeting the chiefs were took an oath to abstain for ever from the sacrifice of human beings<sup>14</sup>. The oath being thus administered the sword of Campbell then passed round from chief to chief, who touched it to the mark of submission on their part of the Government. For his intelligent and polite nature he has very calmly rescue many meriah in Ghumusur. Through his policy of clever and polite Campbell preserved and rescued one hundred victims in a month. Some of the distant villagers who did not bring their meriahs delivered a few little later. Thus in less then one month one hundred and five victims were rescued from death. Among them some were restored to their relatives on the plains and some were taken to the low country. The civil and military officers took charge of a few. Campbell himself retained twelve Meriahs as domestic servants to be employed as interpreter in his future intercourse with the Kandhamal region<sup>15</sup>. At the same time Meriah victims were continued to be rescued wherever and whenever was possible. Again in 4<sup>th</sup> January 1841 when Campbell toured to the Kandhamal found no sacrifice taking place in that area. In spite of the fact Campbell heard that there were twenty four (24) Meriah sold in the Kandhamal for sacrifice. According to the Lieutenant Hills the Baptist Missionary, who was well acquainted with the hill Kandhamal estimated that at the new Feast on the 8<sup>th</sup> January 1841, as many as 240 Meriahs had been sacrificed<sup>16</sup>.

He took immediate and rescued steps (culprit) six victims. He tried to recover other meriah victims with the help of two Chiefs Bissois, namely Bahadur Bakshi and Oatan Singh Dhola Behera and some minor chief<sup>17</sup>. Through them Campbell had rescued eleven more victims. In his tour he also heard that in the previous year i.e., in 1840 two children had been sacrificed. From 1838 to January 1842 Campbell rescued as nearly as 125 Meriahs from Kandhamal region.<sup>18</sup>

In the second step Madras Government had withdrawn John Campbell from the Kandhamal in 1842. Captain Macpherson was appointed in his place. He was very liberal towards the human sacrifices. He contacted with the all the chief of the

each villages and muthas of Kandhamal region he mentioned that. In his communication, he liberalized to the chiefs to sacrifice their gods such as buffaloes, monkeys, and goats in place of human. Which is now observed on the occasions of rite are sacrificed with all the solemnity.<sup>19</sup> He was very much successful to stop the inhuman practice of Meriah sacrifice in Kandhamal region from 1838-1842 A.D. The people might have observed.

Meanwhile Macpherson communicated with the tribes of Athara muthas of Ghumusur. In the meeting there are nineteen patriarch attended out of twenty one patriarch. They stay with the Macpherson for some time. After a long discussions these chiefs were agree hand over the meriah victims to Macpherson in few days. After seven weeks later the mutha chiefs were sent the intimation to Macpherson except Loharingia and Guttingia for the abolition of the rite in every place. Most of the victims were sent to Macpherson except ten or eleven tracts in Kandhamal. Macpherson was missed to convince the people of Chakapad to abolish the rite. So he was return before the time was mature for implore. In the meantime he heard that at Hodzoghoro more than fifty victims had been preserved for practice of secret offering. And the people were shouting their voice to refuse to the practice of secret offerings. He also understand that the same situation in the Loharingia and Guttangia. So he suggested constructing a road which one it was in Kandhamal region to coastal area of Ganjam<sup>20</sup>. Again in 1843, Captain Macpherson accompanied by Captain Mackenzie goes to the Kandhamal. They are very unhappy that to see the sacrifice being performed daily<sup>21</sup>.

To look at this situation, Macpherson thinks to adopt a new plan. He planned and succeeded at the end. He formed a strong anti-sacrificing party in every tribal muthas and villages. By this tactic he influences two third of the tribes and included in it<sup>22</sup>. In the same year the intermediate Sham Bissoi has falsely stated that he has given authorized by British officer named Bannerman to sacrifice six meriah victims. Sham Bissoi himself had sacrifice one at his own place and induced to tribal to sacrifice two more.

In 1844 A.D. one hundred and forty two(142) meriah has been rescued. Most of the meriahs were kondhs and panos or other caste permanently resident in Kandhamal only two children from the low country on the border land of the ghats. From the data prescribe it is clear that the practice of kidnapping children from the low land had been nearly ceased<sup>23</sup>.

In the third phase when Government had taken strong step towards restriction of human sacrifice appointed a new post as Hill Agent or Meriah Agent in 1845 A.D. The first Hill Agent was the Captain Macpherson. Captain Macpherson had started the operation with two Assistant namely Dr.J. Candeanhead and Lieutenant MacVicar.<sup>24</sup> In February 1846, he restored 170 kandh victims with the cooperation of the raja of Boud. In 1846 two Kandh leaders emerged to oppose the government. That is Chakara Bissoi and Nabaghana Konhar who were induced to the Kondh to not surrender Meriahs to British Agents. Due to such incident taken place the kondh rebellion was broke out in kandhamal in 1846.

Meanwhile on the 21<sup>st</sup> April 1847 Colonel Campbell returned to Ghumusur. This time his operation was more successful. In April, 1848 Colonel Campbell took keen interest to suppress the Meriah sacrifice. He went to Chinnakimindy (Sanakhemundi) Maliah to rescue the victims<sup>25</sup>. The practice was prevalent in Sanakhemundi maliah. Colonel Campbell was great fortune that he get the chance to make calm and contend and gain confidence of rajah Adikanda Deo of Gaddapur and their subordinate chiefs<sup>26</sup>. It was great steps for Colonel Campbell with aid and active cooperation of raja he had get through the object in that area. He had rescued 206 Meriah victims from Chinakimindy maliah. Indeed it was owing to the sincere efforts of Campbell the Meriah sacrifice had almost come to an end in Ghumusur by January 1848.<sup>27</sup>

In the final when the Government had feel that the practice had almost stopped in the Kandhamal region. But this practice was taken place in Ghumusur at certain time at the certain places. From Chinnakimindy Colonel Campbell proceeded into Baud hills with assistant Captain MacVicar. In 1849, he rescued 235 meriah victims in Baud.<sup>28</sup> The total number of meriahs rescued in 1849 was 307. In two past season he rescued an aggregate of 547 meriahs<sup>29</sup>.

In January,1853 that is Risingia of Athara mutha of upper Ghumusur was reported to have sacrifice. According to Colonel Campbell, from 1837 to 1854 the British Government rescued 1506 Meriah victims of which 717 were males and 789 were females<sup>30</sup>. In October 1855 four Meriahs were sacrificed at Risingia of Ghumusur. In January 1857 two (2) such sacrifice were made at Rudingia at Athara mutha<sup>31</sup>. In 1858 two more Meriahs were sacrificed in the same Athara mutha<sup>32</sup>. Further in 1858, two chiefs of Raisingia namely Birsra and Damara, were reported to have taken measures for sacrificing two Meriahs. When Mac Neil came to know that, he sent to troops them for rescuing the Meriahs. The Meriahs were rescued and kept under the government protection.<sup>33</sup>

Having learnt of the casual occurrences of the sacrifice Mac Neil moved round Ghumusur to see if any where about to be performed. He was happy to see that except Athara mutha there was not even the rumor of a sacrifice any where else in Ghumusur.<sup>34</sup>

Even then in 1860 a young girl intended for sacrifice in the Kandhamal but that was rescued. But government become stringent that at Udayagiri in July 1865 that for the first time three abettors were accomplished for sacrificing a Meriah in the Ghumusur maliahs. The sacrifice was made in consequence of sickness in the suppliant's family and the victim a youth was known to have belonged to the meriah caste<sup>35</sup>. Thereafter the Meriah sacrifice was not heard of in Ghumusur particularly in Kandhamal. Role of missionaries in the suppression

Before come to the Kandhamal the missionaries were very much known about Kandhamal because of Meriah sacrifice. The Meriah sacrifice opened a great opportunity to establish their mission at Kandhamal in the later stage.

When government officials attempt start to the protection of the lives of the many Meriahs from 1837

A.D. The Meriah Agency was abolished in the year 1861. In the mean time the Christian Missionaries were criticized to the government for the policy of advice and propaganda of the government. They did not satisfy with the result. The missionaries were attached themselves in the Meriah suppression since 1837. They did not take any major steps to suppress but they helped to the government in the suppression through social survey. They highlight the practice through the "*Friends of India*" and other news papers. Some time they reflect the horror practice prevalent in Kandhamal. Some time they also criticize the government policy of persuasion, oppression, and advice. The missionaries called to Auckland's government to take steps in that connection.<sup>36</sup>

According to the governments reports from 1837 to 1854 as many as fifteen hundred and six Meriahs were rescued<sup>37</sup>. But according to the Christian missionaries estimation by John Buckley a missionaries of Odisha seventeen hundred victims were rescued from the Kandhamal region.<sup>38</sup>

Missionary John Clark Marshmen pointed out in the Friend of India that in eighteen years a crime worse than any known in Europe has been eradicated. The missionaries were induced to the people to forget the barbarous practice sanctioned by the antiquity and by superstition. The people of Kandhamal have been raised to in the degree of civilization.<sup>39</sup> The government took up a most important step to rehabilitate the rescued Meriahs. Some were given for adoption to gentlemen of social status, and many were settled as cultivators with the government assistance, some of the rescued Meriahs were entrusted to the care of the missionaries of Odisha.<sup>40</sup>

The missionaries received monthly allowance from the government for each Meriah child for their care from the Government. Missionaries were mostly took care of Meriahs in Cuttack, Berhampur, and Balasore orphanages. The first Meriah was submitted to the missionaries of Baptist Missionary Society Berhampur. In 1849, Colonel Campbell has sent as many as seventy nine meriahs in a day to the orphanage of Baptist Missionary Society Cuttack. The renowned missionaries like Buckleys, Hills, Suttons, Wilkinsons, and Stubins of the Baptist missionary society were take care of the Meriahs<sup>41</sup>.

The missionaries were established the asylums to provide education to the Meriahs as well as to the childrens of native Christians. They were impact education as the students were taught in common government schools. The Meriahs were provided education like the common schools. Their courses consisted of reading, writing, geography, arithmetic, history. Except that, they had daily religious education for some hours according to courses of the boys and girls department was concerned. They were imparted lessons on the sacred scriptures, the pilgrims progress, like Henry and his bearer Baxter's call etc. in Odia. They also repeated numerous hymns, poems and catechism. In Orissa, tuition was entirely confined in the odia language. In Balasore, both Odia and Bengali were taught. The meriahs who were entrusted in Balasore were read the history of Odisha and Bengal<sup>42</sup>.

The main aim of the missionaries education to Meriahs were to make them useful member of the society, to educate them and fit them morally, intellectually and physically fit. They gave more stress on manual labours, so in their daily courses added extra daily works. It was after completion of six hour study, they had attend three hour manual work. In their manual work they trained in Tailoring, Weaving, Gardening, Printing and Book binding etc. The Meriah girls were taught house wifely. They were taught to Sew, Knit and learnt all procedure of spin. The object of missionaries was to make them sensible, moral, industrious and pious young woman. They aimed to make them good house wives for the native Christians<sup>43</sup>.

The Odishan missionaries were excellent job for the rehabilitation of the meriah children after their schooling. The missionaries were changed the old name of meriah child and named them as Christian names even though they did forget their old names. The missionaries were brought almost all the meriah children into fold of Christianity.<sup>44</sup>

The missionaries also took interested to arrange the marriage for them. It was found that in most cases the boys and girls of Berhampur asylums were engaged with the boys and girls of Cuttack asylums. After their marriage they left the asylums and settled in the Christian villages, which were established by the missionaries. Some of the meriahs were also employed as preachers and teachers of their own communities. At Cuttack asylums many of older boys were selected to go to the Baptist Missionaries Society farm near Cuttack, where they learnt to clean and cultivate the jungle. They trained them to build a Christian village where they stay. At Berhampur, the missionaries provided land at padripli where mariahs settled and tilling the land<sup>45</sup>. The America Freewill Baptist Missionaries were provided financial assistance to rehabilitate the grown up meriahs. The married meriahs were asked to settle at Santipur, the Christian village. They took all the expense of marriage and received financial assistance from the benevolent gentlemen of England and India as dowry money<sup>46</sup>.

Instantly after the exploration of the Kandhamal, the missionaries thought to start a mission station there. To get some information about the land, the people and their culture, W.Brown, a missionary made an extensive tour of Kandhamal. He was assured that Baptist missionary could easily establish a missionary station there to preach Christianity among them. Brown believed that if they would be educated and brought under civilizing influence, they would be the most devoted Christians. So he communicated to the editor of "*Calcutta Christian Observer*" as early as 1837 on kondh and their culture for publication. In the later time the missionaries like Amos Suttun, Stubins and Buckleys were proposed to establish a mission station in Kandhamal. They allure to public regarding the proposal to establish a mission station in Kandhamal region through various newspaper and journals.<sup>47</sup>

For the first time in 1845, Mr. Sutton proposed to start mission work in Kandhamal because by that time mission had rescued several Meriahs who knew the Kui language. He was very eager that Meriahs

would help the missionaries in all respect in preaching Christianity in Kandhamal. He pointed out that the mission stations of General Baptist Mission were established in these places. The missionaries were thought about the placed where the mission would easily proceed to Ghumusur, and Southern bank of Mahanadi. Sutton was very hopeful that with the help of educated Meriahs and with the financial assistance of the government. They would be able to establish schools for the native Kandhamal region<sup>48</sup>. Lieutenant S.C.Macpherson was the first hill Agent, who succeeded Campbell as the principal Assistant to the Agent of the Ganjam district in April 1842. He succeeded in establishing considerable moral influence on the Kandh by following a conciliatory and friendly policy toward them. In 1843-44, he was able to save 255 lives from sacrifice.

The General Baptist missionaries again issued circular to different part of India asking for help for the establishment of a station in Kandhamal. In 1862, at Cuttack conference, Stubbins a missionary was requested to all the Christians in India to helping a aid to establish in Kandhamal. The missionaries were very positive because those tribes, inhabiting the hill were more accessible to Baptist mission than any other mission. The missionaries had brought up very tactfully to many tribal youths who given a valuable contribution in the acquisition of the language. These youths are very easy to commence missionary operation in Kandhamal.<sup>49</sup>

As though the proposal by the missionaries to start a mission station in Kandhamal, the General Baptist Mission Society had not taken any step till 1862. In the Annual meeting of G.B.M.S. in England in 1862A.D. the proposal was made true to establish two missionaries at Russelkonda as a mission station was already established on the plains which is twelve miles from the Kandhamal. From there the continues attach with Kandhamal was possible.<sup>50</sup>

### Conclusion

With the help of British missionaries the British government was able to suppress the Meriah sacrifice in Kandhamal. This evil practice was discovered by the British in this region. As humanitarian thought of the Government they would like to stop such inhuman practice prevalent among the primitive tribes of Kandhamal. As soon as British had conquered the land they tried to stop this evil practice. To stop this practice Government had appointed a special Agent to control over it. They were called as Meriah Agent or Hill Agent. They had taken 17 years to complete stop of the practice in this region.

On the other hand the Christian missionaries who were go to Kandhamal with the British Government were greatly helpful for the British to stop this practice. In the time of British action against Meriah in Kandhamal, the missionaries were highlighting over it throughout world through Magazine and News papers. The missionaries were took important role to suppress the practice. Insist of missionaries to the Government for the failure of the Meriah suppression was also gave the government more strength in their work. The suppression of Meriah sacrifice in Kandhamal region was

successfully done by the British government for the help of missionaries.

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