

1. INTRODUCTION

Girijana Seva Samastha (G.S.S), Savara Gopalapuram, may not ring bells beyond the boundaries of its presence in a few tribal hamlets. Its 32 YEARS of involvement may be a non-event as far as history is concerned. Yet G.S.S. is a story of a small band of men from the congregation of the Brothers of St. Gabriel of Central Indian Province and now Hyderabad Province, who ventured into the search with courage for a more radical meaning to their Christian Religious Commitment. It's a story of challenges and struggles, of achievements and failures, of what has been accomplished in faith and what has not been for lack of it.

This report is the result of an evaluation of our involvement, done by over 50 Brothers who were involved in the mission at different periods.

To make it easier for the reader and to be more specific, this write up is divided into two parts. Part one deals mainly with our involvement and its impact on the people: and part II presents our understanding of the fundamentals of consecrated religious life as experienced in the situations of our involvement.

PART – I

2. INVOLVEMENT OF G.S.S. AND ITS IMPACT ON THE PEOPLE

2.1.THE GENESIS:

The Montfort Brothers of St. Gabriel, protagonists of the cause that Girijana Seva Samastha (GSS) represents, draw their inspiration from St. Louis de Montfort who left an Indelible mark on the history of the early 18th century, France. He helped the church of his times recover the dynamism of the gospel message, dwelling among the poor, bestowing on them a sense of identity and hope. His charism and holiness drew sensitive people to follow in his footsteps. The Brothers of St. Gabriel have their inspiration in Montfort. Goaded on by the founding charism of the community, the congregation has been searching out for ways in the recent past to break out of institutional approach in our services. The province of Central India then and Hyderabad now has also been making attempts to make its life and mission authentic and relevant in the context of the poor.

2.2.THE SAVARA TRIBE : THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The hill tracts of Eastern Ghats in the two districts of Srikakulam and Vizianagaram are inhabited by two major tribal groups, Savara and Jathapu.

Unlike Savaras, Jathapu tribe fell victim to the influence of non-tribal culture. Today with the adoption of new culture and subsequent loss of their own they appear to be more Hindu than tribal.

Savara is one of the most ancient tribes of our country. There is mention of Savara even in the epics like Ramayana (Savaras of Andhra Pradesh by Dr. M.V. Krishna Rao). At present they number over 6, 00,000 (1981 census), scattered in different parts of India. 82,100 of them live in Andhra Pradesh and 98% of these are found in Srikakulam and Vizianagaram districts.

The Savaras of the Eastern-Ghats build their settlements near hill streams. The strategic locations of hamlets provide easy access to basic sources of livelihood like water and forest products. The settlements are built in two parallel rows of huts facing each other. Each row is divided into a number of family compartments.

The Savaras are the children of the forest. From time immemorial it has been their main source of food and shelter. Terrace and podu (shifting) cultivation is their main agricultural activity. The other smaller sources of livelihood are dry and wet farming, collection of minor forest produce like tamarind, soap-nuts, and beedi leaves etc. Traditional practice of hunting wild animals supplements their predominantly cereal diet.

Unlike most other tribal groups, there is no clan organization among the Savaras. Enforcement of law is done by a single man who is also the dispenser of justice. Punishments are usually in the form of fine levied. Being animists they believe in super natural powers and in the spirits of the dead.

Consequently rituals are performed to appease the spirits both in time of prosperity as well as misfortune like ill health. The Savara women are given much importance in the social, economic, cultural and ritual life. Besides consanguineous marriages, levirate (real or classificatory younger brother inherits the widow of deceased elder brother), and widow re-marriages are permitted. The process of settling the marriage involves the bridegroom pleasing the father of the bride by paying the bride price. Both the husband and wife have equal right to seek divorce. The size of the family varies from 4 to 8. Families are generally poor and do not pass on any valuable assets to their progeny.

2.3.SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND:-

The Savara tribe had always tended to remain an isolated group. Centuries of civilization and decades of planned development since independence have failed to touch their lives. Excessive exploitation by the vested interests through user and land alienation have not only pushed them to abysmal depths of poverty and misery but also reduced the once independent and self-reliant tribals to mere bonded- laborers. Adding to this deplorable situation the influence of naxalite movement in West Bengal led to rebellion in the heartland of Savara country in late “60s. This subsequently led to a land – mark decisions by the State. The first was the promulgation of a bill on tribal land protection and regulation act by which non-tribals lost their right to buy or own land in the tribal belts. The second was to set up exclusive tribal development agencies for the welfare of the tribals.

The years that followed, however, did not bring expected changes in the lives of the tribals. They continued to live on the fringes of society in subhuman situations

exposed to exploitation and calamities of nature. Subtler forms of exploitation replaced the old ones. Instead of land grabbing they began grabbing its produce through usury. In an economy that is based largely on the barter system, the illiterate tribals always found themselves on the losing side. Their literacy rate was abysmally low at 12% according to census last taken. Health care facilities were non-existent and infant mortality rate was high. This resulted in the steady dwindling of their population. Agricultural activities were carried out using unproductive and outdated technology. Their primitiveness stood out in the tatters they wore, the imbalanced food they ate and above all in their fear of non tribals.

It was into the midst of this Savara community that the pioneers of G.S.S. decided to insert themselves.

2.4.LIVING WITH THE PEOPLE:

1st Phase

MONTFORT BROTHERS OF ST.GABRIEL,CENTRAL INDIA, entered in the tribal belt of Seetampetta Mandal, Srikakulam Dt of Andhra in India in 1983 under the leadership of Br.M.K.Mathew and Sebastian Kurvanmakkal. After a through scouting of the Savara region, Brothers chose Manapuram, a fairly large hamlet with 58 families, to pitch their tent. The village was strategically located, having road links to the nearby town and provided easy access to a number of other tribal villages. Even though all was set, the fear and suspicion that the natives had of non-tribals came as a block for us to make a beginning. So the Brothers began visiting the village on a regular basis, staying in the Govt. guest house 10 k.m. away. Since health conditions were deplorable, health care was used as an entry point. Slowly they understood that

the Brothers were neither Govt.representatives nor private exploiters. On seeing the benefits of what was offered, the elders invited Brothers to stay with them. Due to our efforts we soon established a rapport with the children and the youth. The old guard in the meantime continued to be apprehensive about our identity and real motives. It took them well over a year to understand the Brothers . Later on many Brothers joined them namely C.D.Varghese,Chinnappa Reddy,Monson Kuriakose,Benny,Pius,Bala Basker,Hruday Kumar,Ravi Kumar, K.K.Thomas,Anthony Reddy, Bala Showry.

They inserted themselves in to the life of the tribals by living a simple life. In course of time Brothers were the centre of all activity in the village. The people of Manapuram and neighbouring villages accepted us, as one among them. We mainly concentrated in the areas of health, education and developmental activities. After 8 years of our mission, as per our original plan and ideology, also to help the people to stand on their feet we shifted to Mamidimanaguda in Kurupam Mandal of Vizianagaram Dt.in 1991

2nd Phase

Mamidimanaguda or M M Guda is 30 KM from Manapuram inhabited by the same Savara tribe.Once again Br.Mathew led the team. Many brothers worked in this place. They include Bros.Augustine,Suresh Reddy,Monson,A.Anthony Reddy,Benny,Arogyam,K.K.Thomas,Sebatian Kuruvanmakkil,B.Joseph.We continued the mission with same objectives and methodology.

3rd Phase

In the year 1998 there was a request from the people of M M Guda to start a school for them. The proposal was studied by the administration and acted positively.

Initially we approached the Govt. for land. Since it was not possible to acquire tribal land we purchased 4 acres of land at Savara Gopalapuram of Veeraghattam Mandal. Br.Monson was entrusted with the task of starting the school. So after 9 years of our stay at M M Guda , Brothers shifted to Savara Gopalapuram village in the year 2000 June. Staying in the village, school building was constructed. We constructed the school building with generous contribution of Mr.Gencarlo and familyfro Italy(family members of Sr.Imelda,Cannosian sister).