

## Christian Mission and the Himalayan Communities of Pedong

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### Abstract

The Priests of *Missions Etrangères de Paris* (MEP) arrived in Pedong, Eastern Himalayas in 1882 and they engaged with a small population consisting of different castes and tribes. Their promotion of holistic education from 1882 to 1937 and its impact on the indigenous inhabitants is traced in this study. Through extensive interviews of individuals and participant-observation of local communities an impartial assessment has been attempted. Data obtained from primary sources such as personal diaries, letters, legal deeds, photographs, archival documents and secondary sources including news bulletins, jubilee souvenirs and periodicals of MEP fathers were analytically and critically examined. A summary of findings is categorised under six heads: (1) Education (2) Healthcare Programmes (3) Agricultural Technology (4) Unification of various Castes and Tribes (5) Introduction of new Faith and its receptivity, and (6) Formation of a new Class.

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**Keywords:** Missions Etrangères de Paris, Pedong, Holistic education

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A vision comes alive when it is lived. The Catholic priests of *Missions Etrangères de Paris* (MEP)<sup>1</sup> enthused by a living heritage of selfless service worked in the Eastern Himalayas from 1882 to 1937. Their mission was to promote life in its every form and fifty-five years did not seem too long to realise their vision to bring holistic education to the indigenous communities they opted willingly to live and merge with. The above vision of the MEP missionaries was translated into action in Pedong,<sup>2</sup> a hilly region, nestled in the lower Himalayas in the Kalimpong sub-division of Darjeeling district of West Bengal, in India. Pedong is situated at an altitude of 5100 feet above the sea level on the India-Tibet route.<sup>3</sup> It is twenty eight kilometres away from Kalimpong town and located near the confluence of Murdung Khola and Rishi Khola. The locale is perched on a hill from which the tableland of Tibet could be viewed.<sup>4</sup> The Kalimpong region and Pedong in particular, witnessed a trajectory of transformations largely an outcome of the arrival and settlement of MEP fathers and owing to the manner of their interaction with the indigenous communities.

1 It is a Society of Secular priests, founded in France in the year 1663. The founders are Pallu and Lambert de la Mothe. The main objective of the Society was to promote the formation of clergy in Asian countries.

2 The British acquired Kalimpong region from Bhutan in 1865. They developed the area into a hill resort.

3 India-Tibet route was through Nathu-La, a mountain pass for the traders between Kalimpong and Lhasa.

4 The MEP fathers tried to enter Tibet because there was a belief that there were Christians in Tibet.

The majority of the populace in these areas is of Nepali<sup>5</sup> origin and ethnicity migrated from Nepal to this region in search of job when it was under the British rule. The migrants include the Newars, Sherpas, Rais, Tamangs, Yalmoos, Bhujels, Sunuwars, Gurungs, Damais, Kamis, Limbus etc. T. Raatan provides a definition of Nepalese in *Encyclopaedia of North-East India* in the following words "Nepalese are people either whose forefathers had come from Nepal or those who had origin in Nepal."<sup>6</sup> Another prominent tribe is the Lepcha who live mainly in Pedong and its surroundings. In the *Bengal District Gazetteers*, O'Malley states about Lepcha tribes in the following words: "The Lepcha are the (ab) original inhabitants of the country, who call themselves Rong i.e. the squatters, and their country, the land of caves. The word Lepcha or as it should be spelt Lapcha or Lapche, means the people of vile speech and was a contemptuous appellation given to them by the Nepalese. Formerly they possessed all the mountains of Darjeeling and Sikkim but about 250 years ago the Tibetans invaded their country and drove them into the lower valleys and gorges."<sup>7</sup> Besides the Nepali and Lepcha, a significant number of migrants from Tibet also settled in Pedong and its neighbouring areas. They are known as either Bhutias or Tibetans.

The arrival of the group chosen for this study to Kalimpong and Pedong is tied up with the history of colonialism and Christian expansionism. In 1846, Pope Gregory XVI invited the fathers of MEP to explore the Tibetan Plateau and its prospects. Ever since, the missionaries tried various routes to reach Tibet. Fr. Auguste Desgodins and Fr. Henry Mussot, in particular, having failed other attempts identified Pedong the most suitable place enroute and reported this matter to their authorities in Paris. It culminated in the establishment of Pedong mission in 1882. The British officials in Calcutta and Darjeeling endorsed their decision and made arrangements for the purchase of land for the mission.

Mr Wace, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling had granted the fathers three acres of land. The mission land was by the side of the mule track of the trade route between Kalimpong and Lhasa. Though the place was thinly populated, with the hope of getting into Tibet in the near future, their ultimate goal, the pioneers took up humanitarian work, especially education in Pedong and surrounding areas.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Pedong became the headquarters of the MEP mission in the Eastern Himalayas. Later, Fr. Jules Douinel felt the necessity of getting a foothold in Kalimpong because of its larger population. In 1920, Fr. Jules acquired properties in Kalimpong and the nuns of congregation St. Joseph de Cluny were invited to start a holiday home and a school for girls.<sup>9</sup>

5 The word Nepali could denote either citizens of Nepal or Nepali speaking Indians. It is referred here in the latter sense of a multi-ethnic people who came from Nepal and settled in Pedong.

6 T. Raatan, *Encyclopaedia of North-East India*, Vol. 3, New Delhi, Kalpaz Publications, 2004, p. 18.

7 L S O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, New Delhi, Logos Press, 1907, pp. 181-82.

8 *Missions Catholique de Pedong* is a mission report published from Missions Etrangeres De Paris, Rue Du Bac, Paris, France, 1891.

9 Fr. Douinel's letter to Mother Ursula in Chandernagore, dated 16.03.1920.

The enterprising priests, in keeping with their goal and desirous probably of replicating their European enlightenment experience, constructed hostels, schools, places of worship, healthcare centres, agricultural farms and cooperative society for the overall development of the indigenous people. Altogether eleven priests, Auguste Desgodins, George Henry Mussot, Martin Hervagault, Louis Claude Saleur, Jules Douinel, Leo Martin Durel, L.Moriniaux, Charles Monnier, Gaston Gratuze, Joseph Alazard and Queguiner interacted with the Himalayan caste and tribes and tried to give shape to the vision that guided the pioneers. The priests with the help of the locals established mission centres in and around Pedong to impart holistic education. They established educational institutions based on sound principles in the villages of Pedong, Mariabusty, Kagay, Lingsey, Kashyong, Sakyong and Kalimpong.

The concept that every person is created in the image and likeness of God<sup>10</sup> guided the priests in moulding the educational principles and the methodology for the holistic transformation of a person. Through education, the MEP priests, helped each one to discover his/her God given dignity, uniqueness and multiple giftedness and develop into a well integrated person ready to collaborate with others in the building of a just world social order. The education programme envisaged for the indigenous people had definite aims and objectives, which had both individual and social connotations. Their broad understanding was aimed at social transformation through modernization, productivity, and concern for ethical values.

The individual aims and objectives of the MEP educational strategy was aimed at making people socially adjustable, economically well off, politically conscious of their rights and duties, religiously tolerant and accommodative, psychologically sound and physically strong. For the all-round development of the individual personality, the priests emphasised the need for an enlightened head and heart, enlightenment of conscience and the development of psychomotor skills. Above all, they also aimed at developing the internal harmony within a person, as well as external harmony with the society and environment.

It is well acknowledged that education has a social dimension. The social aim of education is important because an individual lives in a society and fulfils his/her obligations towards the society. The MEP fathers aimed at the modernisation of society in terms of scientific and technological advancement. However, in this context, modernisation did not mean westernisation. The fathers emphasised on the individual productivity of an individual in order to build a productive society. The priests also ensured community participation, as they felt that the educational enterprise is related to the activities of the society. The co-operative society<sup>11</sup> at Pedong is a perfect example of community participation for the social and economic advancement of the local communities. In short, the aims of education, both individually and socially, were

10 *The Bible*, Genesis, Chapter 1, Verse 26.

11 The MEP fathers established the co-operative society for the economic welfare of the people.

visualized by the MEP fathers to develop the innate qualities of an individual so that he/she becomes worthy citizens of India, sincerely committed to God as well as his/her neighbours.

Desgodins chose Tibetan as a medium of instruction since the children of the Tibetan traders were to be instructed in his school. Hervagault, on his arrival at Pedong, also taught Tibetan in the school. However, as more and more Nepali speaking people migrated to Pedong, the administration altered the medium from Tibetan to Nepali and qualified teachers were recruited from Kalimpong and Darjeeling. As more and more locals got qualified to teach, the medium became Nepali, the lingua franca of the majority.

The MEP missionaries framed a curriculum keeping in view of the needs of the newly settled migrants. The main feature of the curriculum was the linking of the curriculum with productive activity. The students were required to study languages such as Tibetan, Hindi and Nepali. They had to acquire the basic skills of reading and writing in Hindi and Nepali. Desgodins' Tibetan-Latin-French Dictionary and Tibetan Grammar were used to teach Tibetan. Desgodes taught Geography by using his own maps.

Gratuze in his *Un Pionier de La Mission Tibetaine* writes, "Fr. Desgodins drew the sketches of the geographical Maps with their surroundings and environments."<sup>12</sup> Arithmetic was a compulsory subject in the curriculum. The MEP fathers were very particular in inculcating moral and religious values in children. The moral and the religious instruction were through the literature composed by the missionaries and printed either at their press in Hong Kong or at their own hand press: (1) Creation (2) The Original Sin (3) The Deluge (4) The Sacrifice of Adams (5) The Captivity of Joseph (6) The Famine in Egypt (7) The Temptation of Job (8) The War between David and Goliath (9) The Nativity (10) The Advent of Magi (11) The Four Nepali Gospels (12) The Acts of Apostles (13) Lives of Saints and (14) The Prayer Book. The same curriculum was followed in all the MEP schools.

The MEP fathers believed that there would be no mental, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual development without the discipline of the self. They also believed that the inborn instincts and inherent tendencies of the children should be transformed into spiritual qualities and values. In all these efforts, the fathers themselves led a model life.<sup>13</sup> They were learned people, with self dynamism and possessed the essential qualities of spiritualism.

Evaluation is an integral part of the teaching-learning process. The MEP fathers respected the individuality of a child and stimulated his/her creative energies. In order to evaluate the overall performance of students, the missionaries adopted oral,

<sup>12</sup> Gratuze Gaston, *Un Pionnier de La Mission Tibetaine*, Paris, Apostolat des éditions, 1969, p.14.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Joseph Bhutia on 4/12/2005.

written and observation techniques as tools. Though the school was recognised by the government and conducted government examination since 1909, the fathers carried on their internal assessment.

While assessing the educational impact of MEP missionaries on the inhabitants of Pedong and its surroundings, people's perspectives have been taken into consideration. The study sample included Buddhists, Hindus, Protestants and Catholic respondents belonging to different ethnic groups and economic strata of the society. And the respondents were from three distinctive occupational groups; the professionals, businessmen and non-workers. A stratified random method was used to select the samples. In the Pedong area, for the first stratum, 50 persons from among the local doctors, lawyers, teachers, bank officers and government officials were chosen as respondents.

The second stratum comprised of 50 business personnel. The third stratum included 50 persons like housewives, unemployed personnel and retired people. Thus, a total of 150 respondents were administered the questionnaires. The following table shows the result of survey conducted in Pedong area among these 150 respondents.

### Perspectives of the Local inhabitants, Pedong Region

Categories of People	Dimensions	Strongly Supported (%)	Supported (%)	Weakly Supported (%)	Not Supported (%)
Professionals	Education	50.33	42.3	6.33	0.32
Business Personnel	Education	52.66	41	6.32	00
Non-workers	Education	41.32	52	6.66	00

As per the survey, about 50.33 percent of professionals strongly supported the efforts of the Catholic Missionaries in the field of education. While 42.3 percent of the respondents moderately supported the efforts of Catholic Missionaries, a marginal 6.33 percent only weakly supported their efforts. Those who opposed the involvement of Catholic Missionaries in the area of education were less than one percent (0.32 %). Among the business personnel also there was a more or less similar trend of opinion. A little more than half 52.66 percent strongly supported the involvement of Catholic Missionaries in the area of education. While 41 percent of the respondents moderately supported the efforts of the Catholic Missionaries, about 6.32 percent weakly supported it. And none opposed the interventions of the priests. As less than half of the non-workers (41.32 percent) strongly supported the role of Catholic Missionaries in educational activities, more than half of the respondents (52 percent) were moderate in supporting the missionaries and (6.66 percent) were weakly supportive. Among the non-workers too none opposed the intervention of the priests.

Categories of People	Dimensions	Strongly Supported (%)	Supported (%)	Weakly Supported (%)	Not Supported (%)
Youth	Health Care	52	41	5	2
Senior Citizens	Health Care	50	46	3	1
Women	Health Care	54	44	1	1

In the area of **health care** programme, from the perspective of the youth, 52 percent strongly supported, 41 percent just supported, 5 percent weakly supported and 2 percent did not support the statement that the missionaries rendered health care to the indigenous people in their need. At the same time, 50 percent of the senior citizens strongly supported, 41 percent just supported, 3 percent weakly supported and 1 percent did not support at all. Among the women respondents, 54 percent strongly supported, 44 percent supported, and 1 percent either weakly supported or did not support at all.

Categories of People	Dimensions	Strongly Supported (%)	Supported (%)	Weakly Supported (%)	Not Supported (%)
Farmers	Agriculture	56	43	1	0
Government Officials	Agriculture	51	47	1	1
Labourers	Agriculture	60	40	0	0

In the area of **agriculture**, while 56 percent of the farmers strongly supported, 43 percent supported, 1 percent weakly supported and none supported the statement that the missionaries imparted agricultural technology to the indigenous people. Among the government officials, 51 percent strongly supported, 47 percent supported, 1 percent weakly supported and 1 percent did not support at all. Among the labourers, who were the beneficiaries of the agricultural technologies, 60 percent strongly supported, 40 percent supported, and none either weakly supported or did not support at all.

Categories of People	Dimensions	Strongly Supported (%)	Supported (%)	Weakly Supported (%)	Not Supported (%)
Bahun-Chettri	Caste	54	43	2	1
Scheduled Tribe	Caste	50	45	4	1
Scheduled Caste	Caste	58	41	1	0

With regard to the **unification of people**, 54 percent of the Bahun-Chettri community strongly supported the view that the Christian missionaries united all the people, irrespective of caste, creed and religion. While 43 percent supported, 2 percent weakly supported and 1 percent did not support at all the statement. Among the scheduled tribe, 50 percent strongly supported, 45 percent supported, 4 percent weakly supported and 1 percent did not support at all. Among the scheduled castes, 58 percent strongly supported, 41 percent supported, and 1 percent weakly supported and none opposed.

Categories of People	Dimensions	Strongly Supported (%)	Supported (%)	Weakly Supported (%)	Not Supported (%)
Roman Catholic	New Faith	60	37	3	0
Protestants	New Faith	55	43	1	1
Lepchas	New Faith	58	41	1	0

With regard to the introduction of **new faith** among the local people by the Christian missionaries, 60 percent of the Roman Catholic community strongly supported the view, while 37 percent supported, 3 percent weakly supported and none opposed the statement. Among the Protestants, 55 percent strongly supported, 43 percent supported, 1 percent weakly supported and 1 percent did not support at all. Among the indigenous people of Lepchas, 58 percent strongly supported, 41 percent supported, and 1 percent weakly supported and none opposed.

The following are the main findings of the survey and the study.

### 1. Education

The beginning of the modern system of education in Pedong can be traced to the efforts of the MEP missionaries. It is due to their strenuous efforts that many institutions were established. They imparted European as well as Indian education. The first educational institution, established by the MEP in 1882, is now St. George's Higher Secondary School with 2325 students. The other schools which were initiated by the MEP mission are still the feeding schools for St. George higher secondary school.

### 2. Health Care Programmes

The MEP priests imparted instructions to the young and old regarding physical hygiene. They also provided medical facilities, and Jules Douinel built a hospital in 1898. Later, he purchased a small plot of land above the presbytery and built quarters for the patients. Later he paid attention to the old and disabled who needed a house to live in. He built houses for the aged and the disabled people that were fully supported by the mission. Towards the end of nineteenth century, the MEP fathers were commonly known as 'doctor sahib' in that region.

### 3. Agricultural Technology

The fathers of MEP intervened and contributed to the development of the local agriculture too. With high breed seeds the locals cultivated crops like rice, maize and other vegetables. It is worth mentioning the names of Martin and Durel who were instrumental in creating agricultural farms to cultivate tea and vegetables at Pedong and Mariabusty. The missionaries encouraged organic farming for the cultivation of vegetables. In this way the missionaries helped the local society in increasing the productivity and in turn their economic development.

#### **4. Unification of various Castes and Tribes**

The local population included various castes and tribes. The immigrant Nepalese had brought with them the hierarchical concept of caste system to Pedong. Their caste system was practiced on the basis of occupations, and had dangerous portends in the society. The MEP fathers who knew no caste system interacted with the Nepalese, the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Tibetans equally. Moreover, the fathers built the society on the fundamental principle of love which recognises equality of all. They believed in the concept of the fatherhood of God and treated all as his children. The humanitarian work, especially the educational endeavour was open to all irrespective of caste, faith and belief. Therefore, the French missionaries through social integration created an egalitarian society towards the end of nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century.

#### **5. Promotion of a New Faith and its impact**

The missionaries established a new religion and its faith and practices in the eastern Himalayas. Some of the local inhabitants of various castes and tribes accepted the new faith and its values. As a result, in a same social group, there emerged a feeling 'we' and 'they'-between the Christians and the believers of traditional faith. However, it is evident from the survey, interviews and other observations that there is perfect inter religious harmony in this area. The Hindus, Buddhists, Protestants and the Catholics live and work together. Till date, no one has heard of any religious clash in this region, since neither the local people were hostile to missionaries nor were the missionaries overpowering.

#### **6. Introduction of a New Class**

The MEP fathers considered education as an integral part of their mission work. With the spread of education in this area, there began to emerge a new class, the literate class. And access to education has given them access to the government and its institutions, commerce and trade, and technical, medical facilities. Among the new class was a small group who accepted this new faith in great strides in the background of their socio cultural moorings and became the privileged classes. All who came in touch with the Missionaries assimilated a value system which is a blend of oriental and occidental in nature.

In conclusion, it may be stated that the pioneering work of the MEP fathers, in formal education brought Himalayan inhabitants in touch with modern education. Their holistic approach, by breaking the man made boundaries based on ethnicity and religion, generated a metamorphosis in the intellectual, mental, socio-economic, spiritual, moral and emotional aspects of people's life. The sweet fragrance of their selfless service still excites and refreshes the hearts of the indigenous communities even today.