

Rev. Oscar T. Lohr: The Apostle to the Satnami People

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Introduction

Christian missionaries have strategically been the vital agents of socio-cultural transformation in most needy places around the world. They have contributed significantly to the development and modernization of societies and communities in particularly remote and backward areas. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one such remote and challenging mission field was Chhattisgarh (then eastern part of the Central Provinces/Madhya Pradesh) in central India. Even today, Chhattisgarh remains “the most hostile state” for Christians in India.¹ Yet Christian missionaries have invested their lives tirelessly to plant the seed of the gospel and uplift the people in such hostile lands. One such missionary was Rev. Oscar Lohr of Bishrampur, Chhattisgarh. This paper attempts to explores the life, the labors and the legacy of Oscar Lohr. It sketches the story of this devout man of God, and draws historic and inspirational lessons from his life and work for reflection and practice.

A Brief Historical Sketch of the Early Life of Oscar Lohr

Oscar Theodor Lohr was born in Laehn, Silesia (Germany) on March 28, 1824 in a devout Christian family.² Oscar was the youngest son of Dr. & Mrs. Lohr. He had five older siblings. Oscar’s father was a gifted surgeon and his mother was a hard working housewife. They were devoted Lutherans. Oscar grew up seeing both medicine and devotion in his family. Like most fathers, Oscar’s father too wanted his son to follow in his footsteps and become a medical doctor. Thus he sent him to a private surgical clinic in Germany. Oscar also studied pharmacy at Dorpat University (now, University of Tartu) in Russia.

While in Russia, Oscar lived with one of his cousins. This cousin was a pharmacist by profession and a sincere Christian by faith. Living in his peaceful and blessed home, Oscar became conscious of his own personal spiritual needs. Here he was able to get deep into the word of God and come close to Jesus. As a result of the devotional witness of this family Oscar

¹ *Persecution*, April 2015, p. 26 (*Persecution* magazine is a monthly publication [print and online] of the International Christian Concern, www.persecution.org). Persecution of Christians is a persistent reality in Chhattisgarh. For a description of socio-religious conflict and persecution in Chhattisgarh, see, Peggy Froerer, *Religious Division and Social Conflict: The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in Rural India* (New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2010). See also, Chad M. Bauman, *Pentecostals, Proselytization, and Anti-Christian Violence in Contemporary India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² Theodore C. Seybold, *God’s Guiding Hand: A History of the Central India Mission, 1868-1967* (Harrisburg, PA: The United Church Board for World Ministries of the United Church of Christ, 1967), pp. 1-2. Cf. David Stowe “Lohr, Oscar T.” in Gerald H. Anderson, ed., *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 408.

accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. This personal experience with Jesus also brought him the missionary call. And in this humble house in Russia, Oscar resolved to become a missionary and to serve the Lord.³ Oscar applied to the Gossner Missionary Society in Berlin for missionary training. Here he spent six months as a disciple of the founder of the society, Father Johannes Gossner (1773-1858), after which he was assigned as a missionary to India in 1850.⁴

Gospel with Medicine

Dr. Lohr arrived at Ranchi, the headquarters of the Gossner Mission, on July 22, 1850.⁵ It is important to highlight that it was this year that the Gossner mission had seen its first converts being baptized. The mission had started in 1845 but had seen no fruits so far.⁶ Dr. Lohr's arrival witnessed the beginning of a great harvest of souls, evangelization of the unreached.

At Ranchi he was engaged in two things simultaneously: one was the learning of Hindi, and the other was providing the much needed health care services as a missionary doctor. In addition to medical work, Dr. Lohr was increasingly involved in evangelistic tours with other missionaries. He was preaching the gospel and healing the sick.

During his early years at Ranchi, Dr Lohr met Mrs. Berner, a missionary widow, and married her. This marriage can be seen as a great example of rebuilding a woman's dignity in a social context which looked down upon the widows. Dr. and Mrs. Lohr together made a great team to carry out the work of the mission. With the first war of Indian independence (Sepoy Mutiny) in 1857, the mission work got badly affected and the Lohrs moved to Kolkata.

The Founding of the GEMS

During their four month in Kolkata Dr. Lohr served in a government hospital. Then they decided to go to the USA. The Lohrs came to Boston in August 1858. On January 28, 1859 Dr. Lohr was ordained in the German Reformed Church in the USA. He served as a pastor in two places, Elizabeth and Rahway, in New Jersey. In 1863 he moved to New Brunswick, New Jersey, and within a year transformed the shape of ministry in that place through his gift of service and mission minded endeavors. During this time Rev. Lohr became concerned about sharing the gospel to the unreached people. He started talking about the works of the Gossner mission in India. He also started dreaming about founding a mission society.⁷

The dream came true on March 9, 1865 as a group of like minded ministers and elders joined Rev. Lohr at New Brunswick to organize the German Evangelical Mission Society

³ Theodore Seybold, *God's Guiding Hand*, p. 2.

⁴ Ibid. A brief biography of Father Gossner may be found in the *Biographical Dictionary of Christian Missions*, p. 404.

⁵ Ranchi is the capital of present Jharkhand state (which was carved out of Bihar in 2000). During the time of Lohr this whole area was known as Chhotanagpur.

⁶ See, Eyre Chatterton, *The Story of Fifty Years' Mission Work in Chhota Nagpur* (London: SPCK, 1901), pp. 22-23.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 5-6. See also, Daniel Francis, *Chhattisgarh Me Church* (Jabalpur: HTLC, 2007), pp. 17-18.

(GEMS). The first entry in the minute book noted the object of the society as “to take the Gospel to the heathen, preferably to the Hindus of East India, to the glory of God.”⁸ It is important to note the ecumenical character of GEMS, the membership of the society was represented by six denominations.⁹

By October 1867 the Board of the society had resolved to (1) start mission work among the Santhals or some other tribe in East India, (2) to invite Rev. Lohr to go as a missionary to India, and (3) to continue to look for ways to reach the native (*Red*) Indians in America.¹⁰ Accepting the call of the Society, Rev. Lohr decided to go to India as its first missionary. It is important to note that though there was much willingness in his heart for the new mission in India, he was hesitant to uproot his family (wife and two sons) once again. Seybold comments, “Thus Oscar Lohr, having left India a refugee, was now to return to found a new mission. In God’s providence a revolt in India had sparked a mission.”¹¹

Pioneering Works in Chhattisgarh

Rev. Oscar Lohr was commissioned in the New York City Church on October 24, 1867. Dr. Philip Schaff, the eminent Church historian and Reformed theologian, was the main preacher on the occasion. Exactly after one month of his commissioning, Rev. Lohr left for India from Boston on November 25, 1867 by a vessel called Sagamore, along with his beloved wife and three children – Carl (12), Julius (9), and Anna (2). After a five month long, extremely difficult, unpleasant and delayed sailing, they reached Mumbai (Bombay) on April 22, 1868. But they were able to step on the land only on May 1, due to dense fog at the harbor.¹²

Rev. Lohr had been instructed by the Society to work among the Hindi speaking unreached peoples. Having arrived in India, he was yet to find such a field. At Mumbai, the Lohrs were hosted by Rev. George Bowen, the secretary of the American Tract Society. Rev. Bowen was instrumental in connecting Rev. Lohr with missionaries in the area. While at Mumbai, Rev. Lohr attended a missionary conference in which he heard the appeal to work among the Satnami people in Chhattisgarh (Central Provinces). This appeal was made by Rev. J. G. Cooper of the Free Church of Scotland in Nagpur.¹³ Significantly, the appeal also had the complete support of Colonel Balmain, the British Commissioner of the Chhattisgarh Division (Central Provinces and Berar). Rev. Lohr strongly felt that the Lord was calling him to work among these people, a Hindi/Chhattisgarhi speaking and unevangelized group in central India. He informed the society of this decision in a letter dated May 16, 1868.

⁸ Minutes of the German Evangelical Mission Society, as quoted in Theodore Seybold, *God’s Guiding Hand*, p. 6.

⁹ They included, German Reformed, Dutch Reformed, Evangelical, Lutheran, German Presbyterian, and The Moravian Brethren.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹¹ Theodore Seybold, *God’s Guiding Hand*, p. 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 12. See also, Daniel Francis, *Chhattisgarh Me Church*, p. 18.

¹³ The Free Church of Scotland had founded a mission station in Nagpur (Maharashtra) in 1846.

Raipur: The City of Commencement

The Lohrs arrived at Raipur, the present capital of the state, on May 31. With the advice, help and support of Colonel Balmain, Lohr was able to purchase 1544 acres of land located between Raipur and Bilaspur to establish a mission station.¹⁴ As it was the monsoon season, the heavy rain prevented the launching of mission work in the target area for more than a month. Meanwhile Lohr learned about the religion and society of the Satnami people.¹⁵ The Satnamis were originally *Chamars*, the leather workers who had followed the teachings of Guru Ghasidas, a *Chamar* reformer and founder of the Satnam path, sect of the True Namers (Sat Nami). Guru Ghasidas (1785-1850) had taught them to give up the idol worship, to worship God as Satnam (true name) until it is revealed, and that that revelation will be brought to them by a *topiwallah*, the man with a hat (referring to an European Christian or a Christian missionary).¹⁶

While at Raipur, Lohr did not sit idle but was greatly engaged in a number of activities. He was ministering on Sundays to the military officers by conducting services for them. He carried out a prison ministry, by visiting the prisoners in the Raipur Jail. He also started a school where he daily taught Christian teachings along with other elementary subjects. Lohr's students from this school later became his colleagues in the Bisrampur mission station and served as religious teachers.¹⁷ Thus the foundations for Sunday church ministry, school for elementary education and training center (which probably went hand in hand), prison ministry, and the ministry of disciple making (mentoring the converts) had been laid in Raipur. Raipur was his city of commencement of various mission activities. These were small pioneering efforts and regrettably no statistics is available. Many of his students at the Raipur school came from the Satnami background and became instrumental in connecting him to the chief Satnami *Guru* at Bhandar. Rev. Lohr then visited Bhandar during an annual Satnami festival *Gurupuja* and he was received with great warmth, honor and affection. To them, this was the man Guru Ghasidas had spoken about.¹⁸

Bisrampur: The City of Rest

The Lohrs moved to the land they had purchased as the rains ceased. There, they initially lived in huts amid the dangers of thick forest and wild animals. Gradually a bungalow was built and the place was named Bisrampur, the city of rest. This became the headquarters of Lohr's

¹⁴ For details, see, Theodore Seybold, *God's Guiding Hand*, p. 15. Daniel Francis has 1600 acres in his narrative. See, *Chhattisgarh Me Church*, p. 69.

¹⁵ On Satnami people, see, McGavran, Donald. *The Satnami Story*. Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1990. See also, Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts* (State University of New York Press, 1998), and Chad M. Bauman, *Christian Identity and Dalit Religion in Hindu India, 1868-1947* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 41-58.

¹⁶ Theodore Seybold, *God's Guiding Hand*, p. 17.

¹⁷ A great example of raising local leaders from the native context.

¹⁸ For an analysis of the event, see, Dube, "Paternalism and Freedom", p. 176.

Central India Mission, then known as Chhattisgarh Mission (within the GEMS). The first Christmas was celebrated over here and it is reported that about 1000 Satnamis attended the program. The first baptism that took place the following Sunday aroused huge protest among the Satnamis. The situation became very hostile. The Satnamis did not want to become Christians. Whether this was due to their individual socio-religious framework centered in Satnampanth or due to any pressure from family members or villagers, remains a matter of further exploration. It is certainly clear that they did not want to change their religion. In any case, Lohr realized that they would not leave their Satnami cult. Persecution and opposition replaced the respect and honor. Lohr's dream to witness a mass movement was almost completely devastated. The city of rest had become a place of unrest! It also became a place of challenges and struggles. However, Lohr did not give up hope, and continued to preach, teach, and heal the sick.¹⁹ Meanwhile some more missionaries came and joined Lohr but could not continue due to health reasons. Lohr continued to toil without being discouraged or disappointed. And although there was no mass movement, the number of individual converts did grow slowly. On February 15, 1873 the joy was renewed for this man of God when he laid the foundation of the first church in Chhattisgarh. The Immanuel Church of Bisrampur was dedicated on March 29, 1874.²⁰ The church continues to exist under the management of Church of North India.

Soon after the dedication of the Church, Lohr had to face the challenges of new missionaries and their misunderstandings. The young missionaries had expected huge number of converts and a comfortable work field. They were disappointed to see the hostile Satnamis and small occasional baptisms and smaller works of education, evangelism and health care, among other things. Also, Lohr happened to be a tough personality. Consequently, the new missionaries left Lohr and his leadership. But Lohr kept his hope of winning the Satnamis for Christ. This hope was to be realized in some extent at later period with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) mission. The Disciples of Christ, a fruit of a 19th century revival movement (the Stone-Campbell movement) in the USA, established their mission station in Bilaspur (near Bisrampur) in 1885. Donald McGavran was a famous missionary of this mission agency.²¹

Lohr continued his mission with his "dauntless faith, courage and devotion..."²² By the end of the first decade of mission work the Immanuel Church marked the most significant development of the mission. An equally significant achievement was Julius Lohr's translation of the Gospel of Mark into Chhattisgarhi. This was the first portion of the Bible to be available in the local dialect.²³ During this time, the father-son team (Oscar and Julius) devoted much time in teaching the early Christians. The growth of mission work was steady.

¹⁹ Theodore Seybold, *God's Guiding Hand*, p. 22.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 25. See also, Daniel Francis, *Chhattisgarh Me Church*, p. 47.

²¹ See, Donald A. McGavran, *The Satnami Story: A Thrilling Drama of Religious Change* (Pasadena, Calif: William Carey Library, 1990); McGavran, *Ethnic Realities and the Church: Lessons from India* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1979); J. W. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India* (New York: Abingdon, 1933); and, Pickett, McGavran, and Singh, *Christian Missions in Mid India* (Jabalpur: The Mission, 1938).

²² Theodore Seybold, *God's Guiding Hand*, p. 27.

²³ Ibid., pp. 29-30.

Bisrampur, like a large mission compound, was the home of all the early converts. Some of them also lived in adjacent village of Ganeshpur. But most of them had been transferred from Raipur, where the work initially began. By the year 1883 the number of new Christian believers at Bisrampur had increased to 175 persons, and in the next seven years the number reached a total of 258 persons.²⁴ By 1884, in addition to Bisrampur, there were three more mission stations – Raipur, Baitalpur, and Parsabhader. The number of Christians had reached 1125 (all stations combined). There were eleven school, 31 teachers, and 12 catechists.²⁵ Amazing growth!

Lohr's Joy: The Local Coworkers

Although many of the foreign missionaries failed to join Lohr in the mission during the first decade, Lohr was not without assistance. In fact, he had trained his own local converts to assist him in the mission work. The local coworkers, evangelists and teachers, came out from the Raipur-Bisrampur schools. They truly were Lohr's joy. Some of the prominent local coworkers of Lohr included – Anjori Paulus, Samuel (Rajai?), Prabhudas, and David (Bhola) – a Brahmin, a Kurmi (farmer) and two Satnamis. These were the very first converts of January 1870. Another great coworker was Pandit Gangaram Chaube, who had served as an evangelist with the Church Missionary Society in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh, and joined the Bisrampur mission after a friend's recommendation.²⁶ Lohr's hard work in training the locals had started bearing fruit. The local coworkers or national assistants were not only active in every area of mission engagement they were also producing literature of historic significance by noting down their experiences.

Lohr's Pain: Sacrifices in Mission

Rev. Lohr labored on the mission field with his family by his side. His sons were the immediate coworkers, trusted and obedient partners. He lost both his sons (and great co-workers in the mission) in Bisrampur. The oldest son Carl Lohr died on October 25, 1887 after being very badly attacked by a tiger. Lohr's second son Julius died after suffering a serious breakdown after the famines. Julius was a great missionary throughout. He had helped his father in each and every activity of the mission. During the great famines of 1886-1900, which lay the entire central India dead and desolate, Julius worked harder to save the lives of the people of the land. He was looking after the relief work in 25 villages, feeding about 1000 adults and 2000 children

²⁴ "Report of the Chuttesgurh Mission" as quoted in Dube, "Paternalism" p. 179.

²⁵ Theodore Seybold, *God's Guiding Hand*, p. 40.

²⁶ See, Theodore Seybold, *God's Guiding Hand*, pp. 25, 28-29. Other notable local Christian leaders included: Mahasingh, Yadosingh, Loknath, Timothy, Jagnath, Raghunath and Ramnath. See, Daniel Francis, *Chhattisgarh Me Church* (Jabalpur: HTLC, 2007). These names are to be found in the second part, written by M. M. Paul and originally published in 1935, pp. 7 and 10. This book by Daniel Francis written in Hindi has dual format. First half of the book is by Masih himself, based mostly on missionary sources and set on computerized press copy. The second half of the book, by Paul, is actually more like an appendix but constitutes the essential second half of Masih's book. It is set on old printing press format and does not have ample paragraph divisions. The book thus has two different page numberings and format.

everyday.²⁷ Julius died on April 29, 1904 at the age of 46. Lohr, a sorrowing father in his 80s, wrote, “He [Julius] has preceded me and if it be God’s will, I shall soon follow... May it be said of my son and of me, ‘And their works do follow them. Revelation 14:13.’”²⁸ Within three years of Julius’s demise Rev. Lohr joined his sons in the eternal city of rest. He died on May 31, 1907 in Kabirdham (Kawardha), 105-kilometer south-west of Bisrampur, at the house of his adopted daughter Mrs. John Becker, and was buried in a small cemetery in Kawardha. However, the Christians in Bisrampur could not leave their founding father in a distant place, and brought his remains to the Bisrampur Church premise on December 29, 1941.²⁹ Thus having toiled tirelessly for the service of Chhattisgarh and the glory of God, the key missionaries of GEMS, the Lohrs sacrificed their lives and now rest in the city of rest they had built. There is no information on Rev. Lohr’s wife and daughter Anna. According to Daniel Francis, they never returned to USA or Germany and rested in peace in Chhattisgarh, their *karma-bhumi*. In his tribute to Rev. Oscar Lohr, his colleague Pandit Gangaram Chaube has most fittingly called him the “Apostle to the Satnamis.”

The Legacy of Rev. Oscar Theodor Lohr

Rev. Oscar Lohr has left a great legacy behind. He was instrumental in founding the German Evangelical Missionary Society in 1867. He also became its first Protestant missionary (with his family) and came to Chhattisgarh, central India, thus becoming the pioneer Christian missionary in Chhattisgarh. His mission became known as Central India Mission. His mission program included Christian religious, educational, literary, and medical services. It is said that the word “retreat” (meaning “rest” or “holiday”) was not found in the dictionary of this great “man of stalwart faith and intrepid courage.”³⁰ The way in which Dr. Lohr built up his mission work in Bisrampur historically set the pattern for other stations of the mission and eventually for other missions. The prominent missionaries who immediately followed in Lohr’s footsteps included Rev. & Mrs. Andrew Stoll (1879-1919), Rev. & Mrs. John Jost (1885-1915), Rev. & Mrs. Jacob Gass (1893-1940) and others. Other missionary societies in the region included: Church Missionary Society (Mandla, 1879), United Christian Missionary Society (Bilaspur, 1885), Pentecostal Bands of the World (Raipur, 1898), Methodist Episcopal Church (1898), the Mennonite Church (1899), the General Conference Mennonite Church (1900) and the Christian

²⁷ Theodore Seybold, *God’s Guiding Hand*, p. 43.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 45.

²⁹ Seybold, *God’s Guiding Hand*, pp. 56-57.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 29, 56-57. This quote really sums up the personality of Dr. Lohr. A detailed statistics of these works is beyond the scope of this paper. Lohr’s works was spread in entire central Chhattisgarh comprising of hundreds of villages and thousands of people. These are mentioned not to present the quantitative greatness of Lohr and his mission work but rather to highlight his pioneering milestones.

Church Disciples of Christ (Bilaspur, 1923).³¹ The Roman Catholics arrived in the region in 1912 and started yet another era of social service both among tribal folks and the Satnamis.

Conclusion

Rev. Dr. Oscar Lohr's labors in Chhattisgarh were both pioneering and exemplary. Rev. Lohr can be rightly called the founder of Christianity in Chhattisgarh. Dr. Lohr was the first Christian missionary to reach Chhattisgarh with the good news of Jesus Christ. Lohr invested his entire life for the cause of Christ in Chhattisgarh. He lived, toiled and died in Chhattisgarh proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ and serving the people of the land, especially the Satnamis. Rev. Lohr can also be reckoned among the founding fathers of modern Chhattisgarh. His contribution to the modernization of Chhattisgarh is significant. Through the means of modern medicines and health care, primary education, religious education, vocational education, and agricultural methods, among other things, Lohr truly inaugurated the building of a new Chhattisgarh – the modern Chhattisgarh. He was a great seed sower of the gospel, a man of God who never gave up. Rev. Lohr's life, mission, and historic legacy inspires and challenges us to obey the Lord of mission, take the risks in mission, strive for the goals in mission, suffer and die for the cause of mission, and thus bring glory to the God of mission and history.

³¹ I am fully aware that each missionary and mission society deserves a focused treatment. Also, the local Christians, who remain largely unknown, need to be studied about. I plan to begin with the missionaries and hope to zoom-in on native Christians. My forthcoming paper on Donald McGavran, the missiologist and father of church growth studies, deals with yet another era of Christian history in Chhattisgarh.