



Religious Life and Conversions of Tribal Society in Undivided Bihar

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Abstract

A discussion on the religious life of a society tends to assume that there are two types of religion: the 'popular' and the 'elite.'¹ Popular or folk religion is that of the masses, the pervasive beliefs, rituals and values of a society, whereas elite religion is that of the specialists, the learned or the clergy. Studies on the growth of Christian Missions in different cultural contexts have highlighted that Christianity usually enmeshes with local cultures, appropriates local myths, compromises with local traditions and even borrows local beliefs and superstitions.

Most Christian communities in India have retained some aspects of their pre-conversion culture and practices. There are divergent strands in the 'lived religion' of Dalit and tribal Christians in India. Practical faith or lived religion has always been merged in multiple traditions, whereas dogmatic religion tends to make distinctions subtle and clearer. Christianization can be defined as the comprehensive process of religious transformation of which baptism is just a starting point. The proper objective of the missionaries in Bihar was said to be 'lifting the cultural level of the people.'

Key note- *factor of conversion, continuity and changes in tribal society*

Introduction

Bihar is a great religious center for Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs and Jains. The State of 'Bihar' derives its name from the word *vihara* meaning a Buddhist monastery. It was in Bihar that Prince Gautam attained enlightenment, and became the Buddha at what is now called Bodh Gaya, a town in central Bihar where Buddhism was born. The teachings of non-violence, equality of human beings and social justice were spread from Bihar to Sri Lanka, Japan, Tibet and other countries of South East Asia.²

The earlier myths and legends of ancient Hinduism or *Sanatana Dharma* (eternal religion) are associated with Bihar. According to Hindu traditions Sita, the wife of Lord

Rama was born in Sitamarhi, a small town in northern Bihar and she was a princess of Bihar. She was the daughter of King Janak of Videha. The present districts of Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi, Samastipur, Madhubani, and Darbhanga, mark this ancient kingdom. Janakpur, the capital of King Janak, and the place where Lord Rama and Sita were married, lies just across the border in Nepal. Thus Hindus claim that they follow the original Hinduism.

It is in Bihar that Lord Mahavir, the founder of another monotheistic religion, Jainism, was born and attained nirvana. It was in Bihar that the tenth and the last Guru of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh was born and attained sainthood. Apart from these religions, Catholic Christianity also spread in Bihar in the early 18th century, as noted in earlier chapters. But in central and north Bihar, the response was not quite encouraging though the missionaries worked hard and made many big mission establishments, started many children homes and development projects along with their evangelism and church planting activities. This was mainly because Christian missionaries were perceived to be associated with colonial rulers.

It is notable to note that Mahatma Gandhi, after his secret meeting with the White missionaries in Motihari mission house, in his famous Motihari speech had said that the white missionaries were good people, who came to serve the people of India and had nothing to do with the colonial rulers. In spite of these, the White missionaries in Bihar were mistaken by the public as part of the colonial force and were resisted for their every act. The gospel could not make any inroad in Bihar and the response was very poor. Only a few people, mostly the orphans and uprooted people, became Christians as a result of the long years of hard labour by the missionaries. Many missionaries, their wives and children gave their life in the land of Bihar and became 'the kernel of wheat' that fell and died for the salvation of the people of Bihar. Their graves are in various parts of Bihar and they remind us that their blood, sweat, and tears were shed for the people of Bihar.³

Christianity, however, not only brought reforms in the life of the converts, but it was also instrumental in bringing about socio-religious reform among those other than Hindu society as such. Christian missionaries in the beginning had assumed a critical attitude towards the Hindus. The vigorous attack of the missionaries on the old social customs and religious ceremonies of the people was not without consequence. Their criticism was mainly directed against Hindu idol-worship and rite of Sati. The attack on 'Popular Hinduism,'

caused mainly two kinds of Hindu reaction: reformative and the conservative. Both were trying to defend Hinduism against Christianity.

While attacking the rite of Sati, the missionaries were the first to show that this cruel rite was not sanctioned even by the Hindu shastras. Rajah Ram Mohan Roy attempted to reform Hinduism by attacking popular ceremonies, rituals, though it aroused the oppositions of the orthodox section of the Hindu community.

Jesuit missionaries like Father Roberto de Nobili and John de Britto⁴ of the Madura Mission, could draw truly devoted converts from high Brahmin castes. One also frequently comes across several cases of conversion from different parts of the countries mentioned by some Christian missionaries in their accounts where conversions took place as a matter of real change of inner conviction and faith.

The major factor which helped the growth of Christianity in Bettiah was the patronage given to Christian missionaries by the Raja of Bettiah for personal reason. The missionaries were not only settled at Bettiah but all facilities and encouragement were given to them for preaching Christianity in his kingdom and making converts from among the Hindus or Muslims. The Raja himself appears to have been deeply impressed by the Christian faith and at times also attended the church service, though he was never converted.

The **second** factor responsible for growth of Christianity in Bihar was the fact that Hindu society during those days was very orthodox and strict. Some of the Christians put direct blame on Hindu Brahmin priests for their cruel and intolerant attitude towards the weaker section of Hindu society, which also led to conversion in some cases; like **widow** were not treated decently in the Hindu society. Such women straight way fled to the nuns in the Mission convents where they were accepted and allowed to marry and lead a normal family life.

The **third factor** was the image of some early missionaries like Father Joseph Mary as a very good doctor. Cases were found in which Hindus accepted the Christians fold as a result of their long pending wishes connected with progeny, long illness or the like having being fulfilled making a sacred vow before Saint Mary or Jesus Christ at the behest of Christian friend or missionaries.

Cases were cited when some parents out of extreme poverty 'sold' their children to the missionaries. Such children were kept in orphanages, or sometime given to Christian couples desirous of adopting such children.

Caste hierarchy among Hindus and social disabilities or ill-treatment with which the low Hindu castes suffered in old days, was also a **factor** in the conversions of the people like Musahars, Doms, Lohars, Dusadhs, etc, in the early beginning.

Here it is significant to note that Christianity in Bettiah and Chhuhari had flourished at the initiative under the direct patronage of the king. But at Chhotanagpur, the situation was diametrically opposite. The missionaries appeared as saviours of tribals against their exploitation at the land of Rajas, landlords and others.

In the tribal area of Chotanagpur, the first conversion of four tribal Uraonsnamely, Nubin of Hethakota, Ghuran of Karandi and Keso and Bandhu of Chintakunitook place in the year 1850. After receiving some religious training they were converted to Christianity along with their families.

Continuity and Change in Tribal Society

All the tribes of Bihar, with the exception of the Paharias, believe that they become one in the Supreme Being who is the creator of the entire universe. This God⁵ is known as *Singbonga* among the Mundas and Hos, as *Candoor Thakur* among the Santhals, as *Ponomesher* (Parameshwar) or Bhagwan among Kharias, and as *Dharmesh* among the Oraons. In some tribal villages worship Mahadev, Kali and others also was found.

The religious enthusiasm of the tribal people is expressed in a number of festivals which mark different stages of the agricultural calendar. The most important of these are *Sarhul*, *NaukhiParab*, *Karma*, *Tusu*, *Sohari*, etc. All these festivals are celebrated in the present time.

Sarhul, observed on the last day of the month of *Baisakhi* (April- May), is the spring festival of the Aborigines. On this occasion, village priests offer flowers and sacrifices of cocks, goats or sheep in the *Sarna* (the sacred place for community worship). It is an occasion of great rejoicing and festivity.

The *Naukhia Parab* is held on the last day of the month of *Asarh* (June- July) when the first fruits of new crops were offered to the presiding deity of the village. The *Karma* festival is observed by both aboriginals and non-aboriginals. In the month of *Bhado* (August-September) a branch of *sal* tree is planted in the *Akhara*. This was preceded by twenty-four hours' fasting and the night is spent in dancing and singing around the branch plant.

The day following *Diwali*, the *Sohrai* festival is celebrated. This is an occasion for the worship of domestic animals which are cleaned and decorated. Among the Santhals, Sohrai is celebrated after the paddy harvest in December-January.

The Christians observed another set of festivals which, though indigenous in origin, have been modified to suit the Christian needs. On the other hand, a new set of Christian festivals like **Christmas, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, New Year's Day, Dead Souls' Day** have replaced many traditional festivals.

The **Oraons** are an important Dravidian tribe. Their principal settlement is in Ranchi District of Chotanagpur plateau. Traditionally the Oraons believe in a number of gods, goddesses, deities and spirits.⁶ At home, many of these super-naturals are propitiated ceremonially and at regular intervals. Now a days, these regular family and community celebrations of religious festivals have been reduced, not only in number, but also in the degree of elaborations. It is relevant to note here that the converted Oraons seem to have given up almost all their traditional beliefs and practices. This might have contributed towards the observed cleavage between non-Christian and Christian Oraons. The social interaction between the two groups has been found to be minimal.

Of all efforts in indigenization, the most fundamental, serious, difficult and urgent need was of theology. If the faith has to flourish in the local milieu the church will have to remain local and global simultaneously. Theology is God-talk. Theology takes us beyond translation. For instance all the Bihari Adivasi language had retained their original names for God. Converts did not have to change the name of their ancestral God when they became Christians; the understanding of God changed, though. "God" is an English word and the Adivasi Christians lived and died for generations without even knowing that English word

called “God”. Similarly, “Jesus” is the anglicized version of **Yeshua**.⁷ The Adivasis use “**Yesu**” or “**Yeeshu**,” not Jesus. It helped in indigenizing the Christian faith.

A significant change has been made also in the religious structure of the converts. The indigenous **Baiga or Pahan** who was the final authority in a tribal village, has been replaced with Catechist, a person employed by the Church. Above him there is a hierarchy which extends up to the Pope (**Sant Papa**) living in Rome among the Catholics and ‘**PramukhAdhyaksh**’ of the Church among the Lutherans in Ranchi. The intermediary authorities above the Catechist in a serial order, are known as Parish priest, Dean or Superior, Bishop, Archbishop and Cardinal among the Catholics and Parish Chairman, Illaka Chairman⁸ and **AnchalAdhyaksh** (or Bishop) among the Lutherans. These authorities are priests or ordained persons having defined jurisdictions and provide religious, social or even economic leadership to the people.

Transformations may also be found on the level of sacred complex of a Christian village. The sacred-grove and the shrines of indigenous deities and spirits have been completely abandoned and new sacred centers of Christian importance such as village-church, **Grotto**⁹ or spots with big wooden cross have taken their place--church of the Mission or parish stations being the extension of the sacred geography of a Christian village. The sacred performances associated with indigenous sacred centers or otherwise in shape of periodical rituals, sacrifices and festivals have also undergone change and new set of sacred performances like **church service, prayers, sacraments, Christian festivals, viz., Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, Ascension, All Saints Day, Cross Sena, Dharamyatra** (religious fairs organized at parish level), etc., have taken their place. Thirdly, the indigenous sacred specialists like **Pahan, Pujari, Susari, Mati, Bhagat, Guru** have been replaced with the new set of Christian specialists like the village catechist, parish priest and several other types of priests and pastors in the denominational hierarchy with which the villagers maintain a direct or indirect contact. Among the non-Christians, certain religious rites like ancestor worship were performed only by the senior most member of a lineage or head of the family (Pachbalar worship). In this sense, they acted as religious specialists but now it is immaterial, and anybody of any age can partake in any Christian ritual or observance which he or she likes.

Equality in **women's**¹⁰ religious status among the Christians has been another change. Women may be found running their own religious women's societies like *Mariam Sangat, StreeSamaj* which have their sittings usually on Sundays and aim at infusing an ideal Christian life among the women.

The Christians of Chotanagpur retained their tribal surnames like **Lakra, Kujur, Toppo**, etc., though they were to accept Latin, European Christian first names, in the early period. Later, missionaries gave local names to their neophytes and also exercised the ingenuity in neologism when they baptized the people giving Indian and indigenous creative names like Prabhudayal, Mashidas, Enem, Niral, Ohma, Baha, Seteng, Jatam, etc.

There were many changes in the **religious structure**. The former domestic religion was inside the house, around it, in the open field or under a tree. With Christianity, the centers of worship shifted to the church, which was away from the villages where Christians resided. Even the repositories of spirits shifted from the house of ancestors (*siraghar*)¹¹ to the **Christian cemetery** located near the church, which tribes occasionally visited. Moreover, while festivals had been occasions for social gatherings in the pre-conversion period, after conversion, besides the new festivals, even regular **weekly (Sunday)** church services became social occasions.

At the Clergy Meeting (1967) Fr. Philip Ekka, SJ presented a blueprint for Christianizing of traditional Adivasi customs, agricultural and life cycle rituals and proposed a liturgical calendar for Adivasi Catholic liturgy. He conducted many workshops. Meanwhile, St. Albert's College, the Catholic Major Seminary at Ranchi, launched the annual research Journal *Sevartham*¹² in 1976 with a view to articulating the scope and method of inculturation and interpretation of the Christian faith in the Adivasi context.

Some authors have studied some of the events, ideas, antecedents and personnel involved in the introduction of the Christianity of the American Baptist denomination in Chotanagpur and its subsequent spread to others. They examine some of the salient trends of events on the basis of the reports filed by the missionaries. It is commonly believed that conversion to Christianity brought various Tribals on a common platform leading to a shared ethnic identity, which found its echo in political aspirations of the Bihari tribes. Concern for protection of language, culture and identity and resistance against oppression and wanton

exploitation are apparent in the motive force behind Jharkhand movement. Chotanagpur, was ethnically a heterogeneous tribal area where indigenous population lived in the tranquility of harmonious balance with nature. In the name of development, the British administration opened up the area to outsiders who moved in bulk and exploited the resources indiscriminately.

The Christian missionaries also entered into the area more or less at the same time and through their strategy of proselytization tried to homogenize the distinctive ethnic groups. The educational and health care programmes introduced by the Christian missionaries were very welcome though, the new faith of the converts could not obliterate their distinctive ethnic identities.

Conclusion

Conversion could be of **four types**¹³ namely, 1) conversion through conviction, 2) conversion on account of one's social situation, 3) conversion through inducements and 4) conversion through coercion or fraud. The whole history of conversions in India - and it is a long history - bears it out that conversions in the first and the last categories are very few and far between i.e. there are very few conversions because of change of inner conviction and also on account of coercion and fraud. Religion can never be accepted in all seriousness by coercion or fraud. At best one can temporarily change ones religion as long as coercion is there and go back to one's own religion as soon as the coercive situation is over.

Finally, after Independence, most of the foreign missionaries had to leave the country and there was no strong indigenous church or leadership to handle the mission activities that were left behind by the foreign missionaries. Except a few cases, almost all the mission activities in Bihar had to be closed down due to lack of a strong indigenous church and leadership.

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