

Adivasis and the Conversion Conundrum

Some Lessons from History

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The Adivasis of central India have been vied by various religious missions in history. Christian missions are, however, exceptionally blamed for duping Adivasis and subverting their society. The democratic ethos of propagating one's faith and the sensibility of the adroit Adivasi psyche must not be undermined in the present age of missionary competition on the brink of communal conflagration.

On 3 January 2017, Mohan Bhagwat, chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, accused Christian missionaries in India of converting Adivasis to Christianity. The allegation, coming from the platform of a conference in the Adivasi-dominated Navsari district of Gujarat, depicts the common charge of the Hindu right-wing against the Indian church in the central Adivasi belt of India. In Jharkhand, such charges have been most common. In October 2016, Chief Minister Raghubar Das warned, twice within a week, of imprisoning those found guilty in converting Adivasis to Christianity by the allurements of material means.

The Present Context

The chief minister's assertion was apparently prompted by an intelligence dossier suggesting that foreign funds were funnelled through 106 Christian non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for Adivasis' conversions (Murty 2016). Since then the activities of the NGOs in question have been under the scanner. Meanwhile, in August 2017, the Jharkhand legislature passed the Religious Freedom Bill to curb Christian missions generally. With this bill, Jharkhand joins its neighbouring states of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Gujarat and Rajasthan in central India—all with sizeable Adivasi populations—to introduce this measure.

The Jharkhand government's move was politically timed. It came at a point when the Jharkhand Adivasi Sangharsh Morcha, a new political outfit, forged a united front of the Christian and Sarna (indigenous faith) Adivasis to protest the government move of amending the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act, 1908 and Santhal Pargana Tenancy Act, 1949 to facilitate the acquisition of Adivasi agricultural land for "development" purposes. In the

face of heated public debate, the two historical acts—considered the Magna Carta of Adivasi rights in central India—were finally amended in November 2016. The amendment, fiercely opposed by Adivasis, was recently withdrawn.

Alongside, the conversion conundrum has heated up. A serving senior civil servant of Jharkhand suggested, in response to the above-mentioned chief minister's statement, on Facebook that the Adivasis should be left alone to choose their faith. However, the state government took objection to this comment and registered it as a breach of service norms, which further inflamed the debate. Large sections of general society seemed to be supporting the chief minister. This is because the society at large is convinced that Christian missionaries, indeed, indulge in wrongful conversion of Adivasis. The Hindu right-wing has hyped this perception. It received a shot in the arm when a section of the Sarna adherents came forward in support of the hypothesis and the chief minister's position that the church has hatched a conspiracy to break Adivasi society.

The local church leaders rose to denounce the chief minister's charge. They blamed him for creating internal cleavages and tensions in Adivasi society. Defensive in their rebuttal, the church leaders highlighted the contribution of the church in the state through its chain of 3,500 educational and medical institutions. However, the charge of forceful conversions, the crux of the controversy, was left unaddressed. Church leaders clarified, albeit sparingly, that the church believed in conversion of the individual mind and not of the masses. Even the recent petitions to the governor of Jharkhand by the National Council of Churches and others against the Religious Freedom Bill, 2017 merely protest "harassment" and contest the government blame of mass conversion based on fuzzy statistics without explaining the substance of conversion. It has resulted in a polarisation of society in general and Adivasis in particular. The present situation is volatile and potent for communal conflagration, an otherwise alien phenomenon in Adivasi society.

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As tempers flare, there is a tendency to shut one's eyes to certain basic facts of history. The facts are with respect to both Christianity as a missionary religion and Adivasis as its audience. Recalling some of these may help in reading the impasse objectively. The whole wrangle spawns two fundamental questions: first, does Christianity, as a religion, come among the local backward people with the singular evil design of conversion through missionary mediators? Second, are Adivasis, on their part, so naïve as to fall easy prey to the dupes of subversive forces?

Facts and Fiction on Missions

Addressing the first question, let us note that all established religions are mission-oriented. Buddhism, Christianity and Islam in particular are organically missionary creeds. Even Hinduism, whose missionary feature is not so pronounced, has acquired it successively. Ancient and medieval history is replete with instances of how missions worked vigorously and transported religions throughout the world. Even as they were disseminated in various parts of the world, the missionary religions assimilated their respective elements with local cultures. This gave them local shades, at times with certain idiosyncratic traits. The Adivasis, therefore, have a local church with certain distinct features.

Christianity has acquired considerable missionary property in recent times. It found a powerful conduit in Western colonialism (Studdart-Kennedy 1998). Colonialism actually made Christianity the most universal religion by the early 20th century. Since Christian missions generally followed colonialism, it is commonly believed that the two were intertwined. In India, this idea was academically validated by scholars such as K M Panikkar (1959) who famously gave the well-known maxim of Christianity being "the handmaid of imperialism." There is some truth in it. Instances such as the clear combination of Portuguese colonialism and Jesuit missions preceding British colonialism, or the complicity of Christian missions with American imperialism in the early 20th century (when, incidentally, the United States became the leader of both Western imperialism and the

Christian missionary movement) make the close ties between colonialism and Christianity evident. But, let us not overlook the fact that the colonialists and Christian missionaries possessed different and at times, contradictory interests.

Colonialism was primarily concerned with political control and exploitation of the colonial people. Evangelism, the spring of the missionary movement, on its part stood for harvesting rich souls for the "Kingdom of God" by Gospel preaching (Stokes 1982). There were occasions when the two interests colluded. Collusion often hinged on the mentality of individual colonial authorities. T B Macaulay, a key official and architect of English education in India, for instance, kept the missionaries at arm's length, whereas his boss, Governor-General William Bentinck, openly supported them. The personal attitude of high officials apart, at the level of the colonial state, the collaboration with the missionaries was always tactical. Religion was a highly sensitive matter. This had actually contributed to the outbreak of the Mutiny of 1857. The colonial authorities would never take the risk of sacrificing colonial priorities at the altar of missionary interests.

Among the Adivasis of Jharkhand, where the conversion movement was in progress, history witnesses instances of both collusion and collision of the colonial and missionary interests (Bara 2007). As part of collaboration, the first Gossner Evangelical Lutheran missionaries were invited to Chhotanagpur by the colonial authorities in 1845. The colonialists wanted to tame the Adivasis, who were restless against colonial exploitation, by employing the missionaries as some sort of colonial social workers. But the missionaries coveted to win over the Adivasis as Christians, ever since they encountered the Uraon Adivasi coolies in the streets of Calcutta and worked out their own conversion project. The government-missionary partnership fissured within a decade. The Gossner mission pursued Christian humanitarianism, as a missionary method, to help the exploited Adivasis and acquired followers in large numbers. The step inevitably pitched them against the Adivasis' adversaries, the landlords, causing widespread brawls.

The incident invited the ire of the British authorities from the 1850s onwards. The government-missionary rift worsened after three decades, when Belgian Jesuit missionary, Constant Lievens, also known as the "Apostle of Chhotanagpur," revived humanitarian help for the Adivasis for conversion. The government officials' objection cost Lievens his missionary career. He was forced to leave the mission field he had assiduously built.

Irrespective of such a see-saw relationship, the idea of Christian missionaries being permanent partners of Western imperialism was firmly fixed in the national mind by the time of independence (Shourie 1997). The statements of various missionary churches, since the early 20th century, that they were now "national" churches were inconsequential. The sustenance of the belief was partly aided by the fact that resources still flowed from the West, which was not commonly seen in the case of other missionary faiths then. After independence, the belief further fashioned the view that the Indian church was a Western imperialist outpost. This inspired the Government of Madhya Pradesh (GoMP) to institute an enquiry into the activities of Christian missionaries in 1956. The centres of the storm, in the GoMP's view, were the Adivasi regions of Surguja and Jashpur adjacent to Chhotanagpur, where the Jharkhand movement was raging. The report of the Christian Missionary Activities Enquiry Committee, 1956 chaired by Justice M B Niyogi, reaffirmed the notion of the missionary-imperialist liaison and left a deep impact on the Indian psyche.

Adivasi Agility

On the other hand, the Adivasi society has always attracted religious missions. Much before the Christian mission, Hindu missions were active among the Adivasis in central India. Hindu myths and legends indicate that, at times, Hindu gods themselves descended among the Adivasis with the missionary object. Thus, Mahadev and Parvati are said to have come among the Gonds and the Bhils, supposedly the crudest humans, in order to reclaim and refine them as "civilised." It was out of a missionary urge that Lord Rama is said to be delighted on hearing

Raja Dasharath's decree of *vanavaas* (exile). The *vanavaas* would afford him an opportunity to serve and civilise the Adivasis, referred to as *vanaras* (monkeys or subhuman) in the *Ramayana*. At times, Hindu gods deputed ambassadors for the civilising task. A mythical Brahmin called Lingo was, thus, made to appear out of a petal for edifying the Gonds. In later days, Bhakti saint Chaitanya Mahaprabhu preached Krishna worship among the Adivasis of Chhotanagpur while en route to Benares from Odisha.

The Hindu and Christian missions rationalised their presence among the Adivasis through two claims. First, the Adivasis were rough primitives with beastly emotional and mental make-up; to retrieve them as proper human beings necessitated arduous reformatory measures. Second, even though subhuman, the Adivasis were considered amenable to the reform agenda of the "advanced" non-Adivasis. Based on these, respective Hindu or Christian missionary schemas were devised. It was supposed that as "noble savages" the Adivasis could be imposed with any missionary programme. Closer scrutiny of history hints that the Adivasis acted otherwise. Over centuries, the Adivasis had evolved their own cultural standards. Based on those, they assessed things coming in the bogey of the missionary agenda. At times, they spurned missionary overtures. Thus, from the trail of Buddhist artefacts dispersed in Jharkhand, one may surmise that missionary Buddhism addressed the Adivasis, the sole occupant of this land then, but the Adivasis were not impressed. Similarly, Brahminical Hinduism was not acceptable to the Adivasis either. Even Christianity, with a most aggressive missionary canvas in history, took five years to attract the first converts. Still very large Adivasi masses remained indifferent.

Further, while accepting the missionised faiths, Adivasis had certain terms of their own. For instance, they opted for the popular version of Hinduism, like Kabir Panth, moderated by the medieval Bhakti movement (Bara 2007). The most successful late 19th century Catholic Jesuit mission wanted the Mundas and Uraons to discontinue their clannish habit and drinking indigenous brew—*hanria* (rice

beer). Both were unacceptable to the Adivasis and the missionaries were compelled to compromise. More importantly, the acceptance of Hinduism or Christianity by the Adivasis was not without some object in mind. Historian B B Chaudhuri tells us that the Santhals adopted Hinduism in the aftermath of the 1855–56 revolt phase in order to empower themselves against their enemies (Chaudhuri 2002). During the same time, the Mundas and Uraons appraised the European missionaries to be as influential as the European authorities in the existing power structure (Bara 2007). This was depicted in their saying, *topi topi ek topi* (hat donning White men, whether government officer or missionary, were the same). With this appraisal, they approached the missionaries for help in their agrarian distress. The missionaries responded with legal consultancy in their dispute with the landlords. The Adivasis then reciprocated, as barter, by accepting Christianity.

Besides material gain, the way Christianity was presented was likeable to many Adivasis. They integrated Christianity with the Adivasi culture and soon, the fusion defined their way of life (Bara 2007). Thus, during the Sardari Larai in the late 19th century, when some of the Adivasis were disenchanted with the missionaries, they floated an independent church. Yet, the association with Christianity and Christian missionaries was not permanent with many others. When missionaries failed to deliver in land recovery cases, they were dumped by the Adivasis. This was not the end of the missionaries' misery. The missionaries were even snubbed by the colonial authorities for destabilising peace among the Adivasis.

Blinks for a Way-out

Deducing from the above details, Christianity in India by virtue of its Western origins does not per se qualify being subversive to the nation. Its Western derivation was closely interrogated by Indian nationalism. The nation, led by Mahatma Gandhi, came to recognise the valuable service of Christianity, especially among the weaker sections. But conversion by material benefit was disapproved and hence, an anti-conversion law was

enacted. The spirit of the anti-conversion law is to check the blatant use of money for conversion. While appreciating this, it is unfair to presuppose the Adivasi audience as torpor. Adivasis always estimated various missionary offers deftly in the past. Over a century of established Christianity shows that the Adivasis have harmonised Christian adherence and patriotism well. They are today better equipped to decide for themselves and are well aware of the national limits.

All the same, this is the age of missionary competition where enumeration of Adivasis in terms of religion is often manipulated. If, according to a claim, Christian Adivasis have grown by 63% between 2001 and 2011, the Adivasi Hindus' growth rate of 39% is no less significant. How far such numerical rise in Christianity or any other religion owes to foreign funding is a difficult question in the present context. Foreign funding is no more an exclusive domain of Christian agencies. All religions have some or the other sort of foreign linkages. There is now matching funding from national sources for religio-cultural programmes among the Adivasis. In such a scenario, perhaps the plausible course is a healthy democratic competition between different faiths and leaving the Adivasis to judge for themselves what to receive or reject.

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