

Christianity In Contemporary Jharkhand

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India is a secular state characterized by a multi-faith society. Our country has been living through religious pluralistic challenge longer than the rest of the world. In earlier times, the destruction of Buddhist images by Talibans (at Bamiyan and Begram) and their conflict with the U.S.A. for harboring Arab terrorist Osama Bin Laden and his terrorist network Al-Qaeeda in Afghanistan had created a furore in the international world. The Taliban's alleged affiliation (especially of Mullah Omar, the head of the Talibans) to the Deoband school in India and the recent ban on SIMI (Student's Islamic Movement In India), had prompted social scientists to probe the role of religious institutions in India. Similarly, the Christian Missionaries have become equally controversial on the issue of religious conversion of the tribals in India. Graham Steins issue can be recalled. Well before the advent of Christianity and Islam in the West, India was already experiencing the encounter of Brahmanism, Buddhism and Jainism with one another. Other religions soon arrived to share India with the Brahmanas, Buddhists and Jainas. Christianity came to India much before it went to the European countries. Zoroastrianism found a congenial home in India, away from persecution in the land of its birth (Persia). Judaism too found a hospitable climate in north west coast of India. In the fifteenth century, in the midst of Hindu-Muslim turmoil yet another religion, the Sikh religion was born. Thus India, perhaps more so than anywhere else, became a virtual 'living laboratory' of religious pluralism with many of the world's religions living together in the same communities over several centuries.

In the present study, an attempt has been made to study the role of various denominations of Christian 'institutions' located in the tribal regions of Jharkhand in India.

We tried to adopt an inter-disciplinary approach to get to some extent, a holistic picture of the afore-mentioned area of research. The anthropological model of 'Sacred Complex' was meaningfully applied to examine the primary Christian institutions of the

region. For this we have tried to trace the history of the region, analyze the folklores, other oral traditions and diffusion of traits and study the

Christian monuments, buildings, ruins and various other types of artefacts with a view to discovering and dating the various cultural layers or the phases in the growth and development of these Christian institutions. In case of subsidiary Christian institutions (hospitals, schools, etc.), besides the study of their architectural designs and infrastructure facilities, their sources of income, maintenance and funding aspects has been looked into.

The study of culture change is essentially a diachronic approach and the baseline data are necessary to assess the direction of change from the indigenous culture to the new culture. For the purpose, handbooks and reports prepared by administrators and census commissioners like Hamilton (1820), Dalton (1872), Hunter (1877), Risley (1891 and 1907), Archer (1940 and 1948) and relevant volumes of Gazetteers and articles served as our source materials. We thought it proper to make an ethnographic study of a traditional type of tribal village (predominantly inhabited by such aborigines who have undergone the process of acculturation) to supplement the literary documents on the tribe for the purpose of comparison. The study was primarily based on our fieldwork at different categories of villages, inhabited by tribals with different denominational affiliations.

Final Observation

Christianity has brought a tremendous change in each and every aspect of tribal's life (ie., Mundas and Oraons) in Chotanagpur. It is the Christian Tribal leadership, which dominated the scene in Jharkhand. However, in recent times, *Sarna* tribals (non Christian) as members of several regional parties of Jharkhand overtook them (eg. JMM, AIJSU etc.) Christianity also provided an impetus to political organisations. There are some pockets of missionary influence where the traditional political institutions of the tribals are being revived and put on a sound footing. In villages the *parha* organisation is still quite influential. The functioning of the *parha* has been put on sound lines and all the Mundas and Oraons, both unconverted and converted take pride in solving their own problems through the *parha* rather than taking their cases to the *gram panchayat*. Efforts are being

made to incorporate modern democratic value and strengthen the existing traditional values with a view to promote the welfare of the tribals.

Even today, conversion to Christianity has introduced new ideas, new values and several new practices among the Mundas and Oraons, and have reoriented their personal and social lives.

A Christian offers prayer before and after doing his work, before and after taking his meal. Among the Catholics some god-fearing people make the sign of cross over the body even before drinking water and rice-beer. The Catholics offer prayers also at night when they finish their dinner and go to bed. The members of the family gather in a room and offer prayers before the picture or image of Jesus Christ, St. Joseph or other saints. In their prayers, they introspect whether they committed any sin on that day, express regret for whatever sin was committed and pray to God that it should be expiated. After offering the evening prayers they go to sleep.

The Lutherans also offer evening prayers and entrust their soul to God for the night, but instead of doing it in their respective families, they assemble at the village church before having their evening meals. The prayers are usually led by the village *panch*. Still, prayer is a part of Sunday service at the church and it is offered on all the socio-religious occasions such as festivals, birth, marriage and death.

Whenever one goes to attend a Church service, a person must change his dress and put on clean clothes. The usual dress of the Christian is a trousers and shirt. Mostly those who have been to school and college also use by young people; shorts and trousers. Urban-bred educated tribals, both converts and non-converts, prefer cotton and terry cot trousers and shirts. Educational and economic status also affects attitudes towards dress. Mill made *saris*, blouses, brassieres and petticoats constitute the dress of young Christian girls, while children below two years of age are invariably dressed either in frocks or shirts and shorts. Christian Munda or Oraon women do not cover their heads.

Another great change in the hairstyle of the males, which took place after conversion to Christianity, was the cutting of the topknot of the hair on the head and the tuft of hair hanging down to neck.

Christian women are more particular about their dress than about their ornaments. Education has made them look upon heavy ornaments as a waste. Modern trinkets like earrings, nose-studs, chains, necklaces, etc. are being widely used. Tattooing was common among women on the face and on other parts of the body. With conversion this custom is dying out. Educated Christian tribals do not like their daughters and sisters to be tattooed. They hold that besides being painful it disfigures the body.

Christianity has introduced a new way of greeting among the Christian Mundas and Oraons. Among the non-converts when two persons meet, the younger bows to the elder, bringing his right hand up to his forehead or folding his hands and saying *johar*. The older Mundas and Oraons respond by repeating the greeting in a similar manner. When a non-convert woman greets a man she will kneel down with both her hands on the head and whisper the word *johar*. Men only fold their hands slightly and bend in response to this greeting. The Christian Mundas and Oraons, irrespective of age and sex, shake hands and remember Lord Jesus when they meet another Christian or an outsider. The Catholics say *Jai Yisu* (Hail Jesus or Glory Jesus) and the Lutherans say *Yisu Sahai* (May Jesus help you) while shaking hands. Among the Lutherans, after the Church service is over, the priest shakes hand with the congregation one by one and the latter shake hands with each other with the words *Yisu Sahai*.

Christians refrain from doing manual work on Sunday. They attend the Church for Sunday service. The type of manual work, forbidden on Sundays, may include any professional or agricultural activity such as ploughing, husking, threshing harvesting, sowing or carrying manure to the field, digging of wells, thatching of roofs etc. However, odd and light jobs like repairing one's fishing net, minor carpentry work, making of *mora* (paddy receptacle), or watching over the fields etc. are not objected to.

Hockey and football are favourite pastimes for the Christian boys and hockey for the Christian girls, and Sunday provides a good occasion for it. Christianity does not prohibit the use of liquor or rice-beer but restricts its use to moderate quantity. It is thought that if taken in excess, drink must lead to many social vices such as quarrels, illicit sexual relations, economic hardship, theft and such other things. It is also feared that such persons mould fail in their duty and not live up to the ideals of Christianity.

Drinking is completely prohibited among the Lutherans by the Church Council. However, many Lutheran Mundas were found taking *mahua* liquor and rice-beer on different occasions.. The Lutherans, however, have found a substitute for liquor and rice-beer in tea, which is taken at festivals, marriage and other occasions. Tea has gained popularity as a cheap beverage not only among the Christian tribals, but also among those not converted but somewhat urbanised. Many tribals have opened tea stalls at roadside bits stops and market places.

Christianity and education have worked against the popularity of dancing. These factors have induced a change of values among the tribals. It was envisaged that free mixing of the Christian boys and girls at night during the *akhra* dance encouraged moral degradation leading to illicit sexual relations. Hence Christian missionaries opposed it. Converts were also prohibited from joining non-Christians in the dances at the village *akhra*. However, in spite of this, the Christians dance very often in an open space in the village or in the courtyard of a villager. At the *lotapani* ceremony of a Lutheran Munda the boys' party and the girls' party arranged a competition in singing Geet Gobind accompanied with drums and- hand clapping throughout the night. Geet-Gobind are songs in *Mundari* and *Sadani* on themes from the Bible. Similarly, on other occasions the songs or prayers are sung in praise of Jesus Christ and on related themes.

Conversion to Christianity has made the tribal give up his old beliefs and practices. His faith in the power of his own traditional gods and spirits to save him and his family from troubles was already shaken and the adoption of a new theology and beliefs and practices gave him the necessary strength. The Christian rituals to be followed varied with the

dictates of the particular denomination to which the convert belonged. There is nothing new about the religious practices followed by the converted tribals. They observe the different Christian festivals, such as Christmas, Easter, All Saints' Day, Israel *Jatra* etc. Resistance is perhaps the strongest in the realm of ideas.

One of the biggest achievements of the Christian missions has been in the field of education. It is a fact that a large number of tribals would have remained illiterate in the absence of the missionary's work in this field. The schools wherever, they are, admit the Christians and non-Christians alike; though the converted tribals may be given some advantage over the other. So while education has changed the life of the converts, it has also brought awakening to the non-converts. The education, which Birsa received at the G.E.L. School at Chaibasa deeply, influenced his ideas and contributed to the making of his faith. Most of the tribal leaders of today have been educated in Mission schools. Education has, therefore, given them something more than knowledge. It has opened up a vast horizon for getting employment in Government and elsewhere. Those who took advantage of these facilities have been able to enhance their social status in the eyes of not only their fellow tribals but also in those of the non-tribals.

Among the converts also, the belief in witchcraft is still present. In case of a disease or misfortune in the family, a Christian *Magat* or *sokha* is called to detect and cure the disease.

Besides administering medicines, prayer is also offered to God for the recovery of the ailing person. It was seen in some cases that a picture of Christ or Mary or a Cross or a Rosary was placed near the bed of the patient. When a man falls seriously ill, a parish Father or any other missionary who is available is called for the Last Sacrament or *Prabhu-Bhoj*. This is the last sacrament a man gets. Sometimes a patient recovers after the administration of the Last Sacrament.

The impact of Christianity on the life cycle of an individual has been dealt with earlier. The Christians bury their dead in the village graveyard, which is meant for both Christian

Mundas and Oraons. They raise an earthen or concrete grave over the dead. A child who dies unbaptised and a Christian who has been expelled from the Church are buried outside the Christian burial ground.

Christianity has helped in widening the horizon of the consciousness of Mundas and Oraons and a new link has been forged between the tribal villages and Christendom. A number of Churches in these areas are engaged in the work of evangelisation and they have their own organizations in the interior. These organizations are affiliated to the larger territorial units of the Churches. In this way regular, contact is maintained between the converted Mundas and Oraons and the Indian and European agencies of the different missions through their missionaries, literature, teachers etc. Sometimes brilliant Christian tribals are sent abroad to be trained as missionaries and when they come back they bring with them new ideas that they are eager to apply to the conditions obtaining in India. Wherever there are Churches, a number of villages are included in a parish. On Sundays all the priests of the parish are invited to attend all important festivals and functions. The influence of the missionary is not only limited to matters of religion but extends over secular affairs as well. Thus through the Church, the Christian tribals come to form a part of the world Christian ritual complex. They draw inspiration from Christian beliefs and get infused with western philosophy and scholarship.

Although the missionaries had much to give in exchange for conversion, which has not been without its material and economic value to the tribes, they have contributed to the destruction of the social unity and communal life of the village.

Catholic missionaries in Chotanagpur preach loyalty to the Church as being more important than loyalty to the tribe. A breakdown in the communal life of the tribe or the village has reduced its effectiveness in its struggle against disruptive influences. The Lutheran and Anglican Churches have abolished tribal dances in the akhra and the Catholic Mission allows them only under severe restrictions. The *akhra* as a social institution has disappeared in purely Catholic villages and in the dances at night only girls of the same village are permitted to dance together and one of the village *panchas* has to be present to

give the signal for the termination of the dance in the evening. Non-Christian religious dances like *Karma* or *Sarhul* have been forbidden.

In villages where the Christians are in a majority the entire village organization has come under their control. The traditional village officers like the *Pahanr* (Mundas) and the *Pahan* (Oraons) have become insignificant and have been replaced by church *mandlis* and *panchayats*. These *mandlis* work under the direction of the local pastor. In those villages where there are a large number of non-Christians in addition to converts, the Christians have their own *mandlis* and they do not take part in the affairs of the village *panchayat*.

However, dress, standard of living, method of greeting and other behaviour-patterns are some of the things, which are quite different between the Christian and *Sarna* tribals. In social relations, the gap between the two, has narrowed after the formation Jharkhand state and especially on the issue of Domicile Policy, they appear to be coming close to one another.

The earlier theological and cultural differences among the three types of tribals (viz. *Sarna* Catholic and Lutheran Tribals) and later its unification due to prevailing circumstances must also be analysed. In this regard, two political developments are worth mentioning. Firstly, the Christian tribals agitation pressing the demand for their reservation in Govt. Jobs led to the unification of the Lutheran and Catholics Christian tribals on the one hand but polarisation of the entire society into *Sarna* tribals and Christian tribals, on the other. Secondly, the recent mass upsurge on the issue of controversial Domicile Policy has united the entire tribal communities of Jharkhand. Their attitudes have affected their mutual social relations in a number of ways and it would be worthwhile to examine them in the light of the data collected chiefly from the mixed villages like Murki and Senha (Lohardagga dist.) Hatma (Ranchi dist.), Pasanga (Gumla dist.).

Tribals and Jharkhand Domicile Policy

In contemporary Jharkhand, it appears that Christianity, to some extent, has led to the polarisation of the entire tribal society into two groups Christian tribals and non Christian tribals . The ever-increasing gap between the two groups got manifested in the Christian movement for the demand of reservation in Govt. jobs, where the non- Christian tribals opposed it in a very organised manner. However, some scholars consider the recent controversial 'Domicile Policy' (which envisages reservation of Govt. posts for every indigenous people) a ploy to bridge the gap between the Christian and non-Christian tribals and unite them to throw out the outsiders (*dikus*) from the entire Jharkhand territory. This appears to be a myopic assessment of an issue, which has very far-reaching consequences in this region. In the present scenario, it is the politicisation of a very sensitive matter, whose genesis lies in Christianisation of tribals. Anyway, avoiding digression, it will be appropriate to analyse the mutual relations among the various denominations of Christian Churches. May be, it was this mutual sectarian rivalry among the Churches, which got channelised and accumulated in the present form of crisis. However, other parties are no doubt equally guilty for creating such a precarious situation. Now, let's examine the mutual attitude and social interaction of various groups in Jharkhand.

After conducting a fieldwork of this region, we compiled our data, which was primarily based on interviews, schedule cum-questionnaire, etc. It's content of question comprised relevant themes like mutual social status in terms of religious affiliation of an individual, his dinning habits, drinking habit, prohibition, preference of a neighbour, denominational superiority, and last but not the least, general awareness on issues of national and international importance, globalisation, etc.

We noticed a common thing at the individual level, the gap among the members of various sects appears to have become very superficial. Globalisation and Information Technology revolution has its direct or indirect effect on the urban tribal population in Jharkhand. International events like 11th Sept. incident of USA and the subsequent U.S.' war against Afghanistan for capturing Osama, also affected the psychology of the urban educated tribals. More importantly, recent events (at national levels) like innumerable

attacks on Churches and Priests, Graham Staines' tragedy, in the wake of rising Hindu Fundamentalism, have created a sort of fear-psychosis in the minds of all Christians in Jharkhand. Courtesy IT revolution, even the marginal tribals in the remotest corner of Jharkhand are aware of all these incidents. Naturally, the superficial rift among all individuals as members of various denominations of Churches have been abridged. In over reaction, after the formation of Jharkhand as a separate state, a new phenomenon, regional chauvinism (or to some extent Tribal Fundamentalism) in the form of agitation for the implementation of Domicile Policy has emerged. However, on the basis of information from our fieldwork, the blame can easily be thrown on the politician, as our interviews and questionnaire reflected no animosity, rivalry or tension at the individual level among the tribals. Therefore, contemporary political turmoil in Jharkhand is definitely a camouflage courtesy, selfish politician, incompetent bureaucrats and indifferent attitude of other responsible agencies. Since, this emerging 'regional chauvinism' in Jharkhand is still in its embryonic stage, it can be solved if handled with dexterity by all the parties.

Tribal Conversion

The Indian Christian mission for conversion had been criticized from various points of view. First, that it has been related to the 18th and 19th century expansion of western power in the world accompanied by the hope that all the world would soon come under Christendom. Second, it was based on ignorance of other religions and religious cultures and an unthinking devaluation of them as satanic or idolatrous only and would soon disappear as superstitious and inhuman. Third, the appeal to conversion was confined largely to the marginalized and oppressed sections of other religions and others who saw in it a means of social uplift unconnected with spiritual goals. Fourth, that its understanding of the gospel was too individualistic and partial as it isolated the souls to be saved from the whole persons related to society and culture. These criticisms are true and many of the traditional forms of evangelistic mission will have to change if they are to be accepted. The crucial issue for the mission is whether the cutting edge of proclamation of Christ as Saviour and invitation to those who accept Him to join the Church remain valid or not in the new setting. Do they require a new form of the fellowship of the church, which is different from the religious communities as understood in India. For instance, just as the

church takes form in different cultures, can Christ-centred fellowships around the Lord's Table and the Word of God get formed within different religious communities, as in the case of Keshub Chunder Sen of Bengal in the 19th cent and Subba Rao of Andhra Pradesh in the 20th century.

Even in a recent meeting of Christian priests, it was envisaged that the process of modernization of religious traditions is a contemporary social reality in India. The Christian contribution in this context should be in relation to the struggle of India to develop, through dialogue among the many religions, cultures and philosophies, a body of common insights about being and becoming human, that is, a common framework of humanism which will humanize the spirit of modernity and the process of modernization.

While preparing for the centenary celebrations of the 1893 World Congress of Religions of Chicago, Metropolitan Paulose Mar Gregorios said that Chicago 1993 Global Concourse of Religions must "be committed not just to dialogue with each other but to the future of humanity as a whole". Therefore, religious institutions while adopting their respective policies should also take globalisation, fundamentalism, etc. into their consideration.

Globalisation as a matter of tribal concern

Globalisation in the tribal world witnessed welfare society making way for market driven materialistic society characterized by consumerism. Hi-tech development under globalisation is further marginalizing the poorer sections of traditional society especially the *dalits*, and the tribals, by destroying their traditional living and community life by alienating them from the land, the forest and the water sources by which they made their living. It also destroys these natural bases of their traditional community of life. Along with health and social welfare, education too has become a commodity in the market with self-financed technical institutions imparting training in technical and managerial skills for employment in MNCs to those who can afford it. This leads to greater socio economic disparity among the tribal communities of Mundas and Oraons, This disparity precipitates socio economic tension among the two communities. How does the concern for a higher

education that prevents the mechanization of life and marginalisation of the weaker people and the destruction of the ecological basis of life by technocracy find expression? How do religious institutions join the search for an alternate paradigm of human development and technology with a human face in the context of the technocratic momentum of globalisation?

We have in India the traditions of Gandhi-Vinoba-led Sarvodaya, Lohite Socialism, Jai Prakash's Total Revolution and Ambedkar's pattern of dalit struggle which can become solution to this problem by providing an 'alternative paradigm'. Many of our academics like Rajni Kothari, Ashish Nandy and Vandana Shiva have sought to formulate the new direction. They themselves recognize that the base of this alternative paradigm has to be the movements of peoples who are the victims of globalisation. Taking these things into consideration, a realistic, constructive and proactive attitude must get reflected in the policies of the religious institutions including various denomination of Churches in the contemporary tribal society of Jharkhand.

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