

Chapter [8.1]

Impact of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and other religions on Tribal societies.

[Reference : 'Tribal India' - Nadeem Hasnain]

Religion

- ⇒ Tylor : Belief in supernatural
- ⇒ Durkheim : Unified system of belief and practices related to sacred things.

↳ Tribals in India presents colourful panorama of religious faiths and practices which is manifestation of adjustments with their culture, ecological condition and social practices. Let see various religion present in tribal societies and impact of mainstream religion like Hinduism, Christianity on tribal societies.

Religion:- Indian Tribes :

Tribal population in India lives in relatively isolated areas, they are superstitious and believes in magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. They follow mix. of fetishism, animism, and totemism. Religious ceremonies are done by pahan, Bonga and local priests. Religion in tribals is inter-linked with social, economic and political life.

- ↳ Religious practices are also depends on local resources in particular area. overwhelming majority of tribals are still maintaining their exclusive beliefs and practices, whether these practices and beliefs are influenced by Hinduism or Christianity or any other Religion.
- ↳ Scholars like Hutton, Elwin, Ghurge and others have long held opinion that tribal religion in India are irregular part of Hinduism. various religious forms of tribals in India are :

(i) Animism : Belief in spirit or soul. These spirits influence destiny of man according to follower. They can be malevolent or Benevolent.

e.g. @ korwas , their spirit presiding over crops, cattle.
 @ Kanikkaran, (Trivendrum) , follows animism

(ii) Bongaism : Supernatural power, it is similar to manasim

e.g. chotanagpur tribes like Munda, Ho, Oraons believes in Bonga.

- ↳ Bicycle has of late become Bonga, the powerful steam engine is also Bonga ; etc.
- ↳ Oraons protect themselves from Malevolent Mana by ritual performance in each village.

(iii) Ancestral worship :

- ↳ Uralis worship their ancestors whenever they perform a sacrifice to promote fertility in field.

(iv) Totemism :

- ↳ mysterious Elation with some plant, Animals,
- ↳ Totem object refrain from eating or something touching.
- ↳ e.g. Santhal and Kharia have clan named after totem object.

(v) Fetishism :

- ↳ worship particular object : living or Nonliving.
- ↳ e.g. Bondas regard certain sword supposed to link with superior Rajput warrior. They assemble at Banayan tree and sword hidden in thick foliage, then sacrifice done with sword each year.
- ↳ Mursias of Baster - posses Big Drum (fetishism)

(vi) Head Hunting, Cult of dead, Taboo, etc.

- ↳ These are various religious practices among Indian tribes. Let see Impact of various mainstream regions on tribal religious practices.

Impact of Hinduism

Majority of tribal population in India still follows their exclusive beliefs and practices. More than 90% of them are oriented towards Hinduism and passing through various stages of Hinduisation.

Distribution of Hinduisised tribal area:

(i) Western India : Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra

e.g. Bhil, Korkari, Pradhan, Warli

(ii) Southern India : Telengana, Andhra Pradesh,

Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala

e.g. Toda, Badaga, Chenchu, Gond

(iii) Middle/central India : MP, Jh, Chattisgarh.

e.g. Gond, Khond, Bhumij.

(iv) Eastern India : Odisha, Bihar, West Bengal

e.g. Oraon, Santhal, etc.

Historical background:

↳ The impact of Hinduism on tribal societies can be evident from various epics, mythologies.

- ↳ Relation between tribals and mainstream Hindu society observed in Mahabharata. In Mahabharata Arjuna married to Naga Princess, Bhima also married to tribal Hidimba. Many tribal groups participated in war also.
- ↳ In Ramayana, Sabari who gave fruits to Rama was from Savara tribe.
- ↳ Later in Ancient India due to increase in transportation and communication routes through tribal belts, Hinduism came into contact with tribal societies and their isolation started decreasing over the period.
- ↳ Medieval period marked by increased in Peasantisation process in tribal areas. Tribals came in contact with neighbouring Hindus to adopt new cultivation methods. Along with cultivation methods they start popular Hindu belief and practices.
- ↳ This led to creation of local version of various Hindu epics like Ramakatha (more than 2 dozen)
- ↳ Bhakti movement played important role during these time to popularise Hinduism e.g. Tana Bhagat.

British Rule Impact :

- ↳ British rule accelerated the process of cultural contact and acculturation with outside world as a result of increase communication. Many tribal areas hitherto closed were now thrown open.

- ↳ Tana Bhagat movement during time of British rule was based on Bhakti movement of Hinduism.
- ↳ British policies of revenue maximisation led to increase in peasantisation process, increase communication of tribal with outsiders. Hence most of the peasant and outsiders were Hindu, hence impact of Hinduism has increased during British rule.

Post Independence :-

- ↳ In post Independence period, process of Sanskritisation, modernisation, technological development has increased contact between outsider (mainly Hindus) and tribal societies.
- ↳ Hence, Hinduism impact varies with different time period.

Preference for Hinduism :-

- ↳ As more than 90% tribal population impacted from Hinduism, lets understand why such huge percentage of population of tribal affected due to Hinduism.
- (i) During ancient period role of Sadhus, Sanyasi, Mahatmas played major role to extend Hinduism in tribal area.

- (ii) Tribal relation with Hindu societies through
- Ramayan, Mahabharat epics
 - Peasantisation process.
- (iii) Brahmanical influence : Brahmanism introduce Hindu belief and practices with proper reasons they gave evidences from various epic. They gave reason for present plight of tribals as ignoring vedic literature, rituals and taboos.
- (iv) Hinduism process is smooth compare to Christianity and Islam. Smooth process of adoption of Hindu practices without abrupt change in social practices of tribal life [No need to giving up tribal values, rituals].
- (v) Hinduism is more compatible to local tribal culture compare to Christianity and Islam. Tribes can continue it's values and belief with adaptation of new Hindu beliefs [Tribes can retain Autonomy of Culture].
- (vi) Sacred complex of various Hindu religion played role in Hinduisiation.
- (vii) Role of Bhakti movements during Medieval and Colonial period played role in impact of Hinduism on tribals.
- (viii) British policy of peasantisation (mostly Hindus) in tribal area.

(ix) Economic security in Hinduism attract tribal societies (Jajmani system).

(x) Tribe-Caste-Continuum in various regions gives contact of Hinduism to tribal societies.

Process of Hinduism Impact

① Peasantisation : Tribals start learning cultivation practices like mainstream societies. during these process of adopting new method they came into contact with outsider (mostly Hindu cultivator)

↳ The contact was not limited to agricultural practices, but includes Hindu belief system and Hindu practices for example festivals.

② Tribe-Caste-Continuum : Due to contact with outsider various characteristics of Hindu Caste system started in tribal societies.

e.g. Gond tribe, Bhil tribe, Surjit Sinha study of Rajput-Gond continuum.

③ Tribe-Caste : Certain tribes totally assimilated to Hindu society by gradually transforming into caste

e.g. Griffith study of Hinduisation of Kol tribe

④ Kshayization of tribals (Sanskritisation process)

e.g. Tharu study by Srivastava

Gond - Rajput study by Surjit Singh.

⑤ Bhakti movement :

↳ Sachidanand gave an elaborated account of Hinduization of Oraon with role of Tana Bhagat movement.

↳ Bhakti movement had explain the tribal population about difference in true Hinduism and Hindu landlord and Moneylender exploitation. Hence view of tribals toward Hinduism changed accordingly because of Bhakti movement intervention.

Case studies :-

① Oraon tribe study (By Sachidanand)

↳ Oraon have started performing Swami Pooja (Sravan Pooja) and offer a goat at Devi Mandap. Pahan (Priest) led the worship performance.

↳ Bhakti cult originated in later half of 18th century among Oraon. Tana Bhagat was most celebrated Bhagat among various Bhagat of Oraon. They worship Mahadev.

↳ Oraon started adopting cleaner practices, left Beef eating and started wearing sacred thread (Janey).

② Mythology of Bhil tribe :

↳ According to it Parvati was from a Bhil tribe and when Bhils had demanded bride price from Shiva, he refused. In order to get money Bhil killed Nandi, as they heard that Nandi's shoulder contain precious pearls. The consequence was Shiva's curse of poverty. But at same time they got 'Vardaan' that if they resorted to theft to earn livelihood, it would invite no sin / curse. And hence many subgroup among Bhil consider them as "Thieves of Shiva".

③ Tharus (S.K. Srivastava) and Khasa (D.N. Majumdar) :

They started accepting Kshatriya practices. Kshatriyization is most popular form of Sanskritization process.

④ Bhumij Study (By Surjit Sinha) :- Jharkhand and West Bengal area.

↳ Hinduization of Bhumij tribe through Rajput Model. Bhumij started agricultural practices and adopted many Rajput practices [Tribal-Rajput - continuum]. [Pseudo tribalism]

↳ They nearly become Hindu society, but still want S.T. status for reservation benefit.

⑤ Gond tribe (surjit sinha study) :

↳ Gonds in Baster area started imitating way of life of Rajput (T-C-C topic)

⑥ Hill Reddy of Andhra Pradesh :

↳ Started practicing Kshatriya practices.

⑦ N.K. Bose study of Juangs (Odisha) :

↳ They previously practicing shifting cultivation, start following new practices after coming out of forest.

↳ Pallaharas become wheat cultivators and Dhen-Kanal become oil extracting community and start claiming caste system.

Dr. Verrier Elwin classified tribes into 4 major groups according to their stage of cultural development.

Class-I : Purest of pure tribal group : Isolated, retain their religious practices
e.g. Highlanders, A&N islanders, etc.

Class II : Contaminated culture, some practices retain and some changes.

Class III : Largest section of population. These are in phase of transition. They are called Backward Hindus.

Class IV : Adopted complete Hindu faith, live in modern style. Represented few population

⇒ Essay by N.K. Bose: "The Hindu mode of Tribal Absorption". He explain about how tribal custom and rites are modified into Hindu way of customs and rites [Caste system]

Overall Impact of Hinduism :

- ① Adapting Caste like features [Caste-Tribe-Continuum]
- ② Hindu Gods and deities worship started
e.g. Bhil, Oraon worship Shiva (Mahadev).
- ③ Kshatriya Mode of life adopted by many tribes
e.g. Tharus, Khasa, RajGonds.
- ④ Giving up beef eating, start wearing sacred thread, change marriage, birth rituals, mate selection methods, etc. [Dowry practices]
- ⑤ Started following Bhakti cult e.g. Tana Bhagat
- ⑥ family structure and relations impacted due to Hinduism as status of women is now subordinated.
- ⑦ Services from Brahmins and Priest for rituals.
- ⑧ Some tribal adopted Hinduism freely and Hence creating new socio-cultural system based on amalgamation of Tribalism and Hinduism
e.g. Rajbanshi of Bengal : They claim to belong to same Gotra but practices gotra endogamy (not present in Hinduism).

⑨ New Economic System of settled agriculture have improved their income sources.

⑩ Some have adopted caste system services (Jajmani services) ensuring economic security. However, these Jajmani system is declining in recent period.

Negative Impacts of Hinduism :-

- ① Replacement of simple tribal practices, rituals by complex Hindu rituals.
- ② New system requires money and dependent on brahmin priest for ritual, ceremonies.
- ③ Introduction of evil practices like child marriage, Caste discrimination, untouchability.
- ④ Decreasing importance of Youth Dormitories due to Hindu religious taboo, this led to increase in family tension and in community.
- ⑤ Tribals started losing faith in their own religious-magical practices and beliefs, without available of new basis of faith.

- (f) Premarital and extra-marital sexual relations
socially sanctioned, outsiders taking advantage
and also this led to prostitution in some areas.
- (g) Practice of bride price replaced by dowry.
- (h) Patrilineal family structure become prevalent
- (i) Evil practice of Caste system adopted, they are
generally absorbed into lowest caste, Hence
exploitation and untouchability continued by the
upper castes.
- (j) Due to new ritual practices, marriage ceremonies
now need more money → Indebtedness, land
alienation, poverty, etc. Almost all the tribal
problems are related to these social changes.
- (k) Authority centre changes in village, Hence dispute
resolution become difficult than before.
- (l) Social control mechanism have undergone through
process of change in authority, supernatural
power, etc. Hence increase in crime rate.
- (m) Women status in family has decreased (Dowry)
- (n) Beef eating, tribal food practices given up led to
malnutrition.

These are the impact Hinduism on tribals of India.

Impact of Christianity

The spread and impact of Christianity may be traced back to the establishment of British Colonial rule, which led to establishment of missionaries and churches in tribal areas.

Distribution

- ↳ Nearly 4-5% of tribal population have adopted Christianity or influenced by Christianity.
- ↳ Major concentration of Christian tribals observes in North East Himalayan region: Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram.
- ↳ Other areas are pockets of Odisha, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and in some parts of South India.
- ↳ Christian missionaries on one hand took the propagation of Christianity and on the other laid down extensive network of social services like Health, education sectors. Thus they become first agency of welfare in tribal areas.
- ↳ The first impact of Christianity was felt among the Khasis (1813), Oraon (1845) and Bhil (1880).

Reason for Accepting Christianity :

- ① Revolt against Hindu moneylenders, shopkeepers, etc.. (Dikhus) , Because these moneylenders were mostly Hindus , Hence as symbol of revolt against them many tribals adopted Christianity.
e.g. Kol Revolt (1930s) and spread of Christianity around chotanagpur plateau region .
- ② Christianity has been earliest channel of westernisation.
- ③ Christianity act as welfare agency hence attracted many tribes.
- ④ No caste system present in Christianity, hence Some Hinduized tribes were converted to Christianity .

Role of British Administration

- ↳ Portuguese had impacted on some areas in west coast of India, Dutch and French interested in spreading commercial and political activities but not succeeded. So main agency of impact brought by British Rule during it's colonial administration.
- ↳ Charter Act 1813 Allowed missionary activities.
- ↳ policy of isolationism and allowing only missionary in tribal area → impact on tribal societies .

| Case Study | :

① K. N. Sahay (1963) studied Christian converts of Chotanagpur. Christianity brought them change of self image and identity among tribal converts. They consider themselves superior over non-converts and think that they practice best religion of world.

e.g. Oraon society was homogenous before conversion now their society divided because of Christianity.

② S.C. Roy and Majumdar study : tribes of Chotanagpur like Munda, Oraon, Kharias embrace Christianity to avoid suffering from Hindu landlords. The Christianity has provided first model of westernization to tribals through western education and western values and morals.

③ Khasi of Meghalaya were divided into Christian Khasi and non-Christian Khasi. This division led to conflict among Khasis and sometimes small number community had to migrate to other area or urban area.

④ Mizoram (Lushai Hill area) : education was used by missionaries to spread Christianity.

They have published books both for general education and Christian religion (spreading through literature)

⑤ Animesh Roy Study (1993) : In Mizo, child was burned along with mother (dead), But after Christian missionaries reached there, they abandon this practice, as missionary started taking care of childrens.

- ↳ Under Christianity, belief in spirit, and their appeasement through sacrifices and ritual were replaced by new faith.
- ↳ Under old Mizo customs marriages and divorces were easily done through. Now marriage has attained a religious overture. monogamy has been accepted totally.

Overall Impact / general changes :

① Christianity is earliest agency of welfare in tribal areas. (welfare related to education and health services). In education they provided both modern education and religious education. They provided vocational education. Christian organisations started co-operative societies, hence help them to attain economic security and to avoid exploitation from moneylender.

- ② These missionaries promoted tribal languages for spread of Christian ideas, later they started promoting English also.
- ③ Christianity gave tribal people sense of self respect, confidence.
- ④ Belief and value system of tribals which are superstitious were replaced by secular and modern values.
- ⑤ Marriage - Religious overtones, divorce rate decreased tribals started following monogamy.
- ⑥ It is a channel of westernization in tribal societies. western lifestyle, dressing pattern, food, going to church on Sunday, attending and celebrating western festivals, cosmetic use, western music, etc.....
- ⑦ It is generally regarded as fashionable to become Christian and get educated and westernize.
- ⑧ Church association advocates abstinence from drinking practices (deaddiction)
- ⑨ Christianity discouraged child marriage, polygamy practices in tribal societies.
- ⑩ They promoted immunization, sanitation practices among tribals.

Negative Impact :

- ① Main objective of christian missionaries was shown as welfare of tribal people, they were on mission of civilization of tribal people.
- ② However, certain elements are considering the spread of Religion and conversion of tribals to Christianity (some incidents reported).
- ③ Christianity divided societies which were previously homogenous and united for example division of Khasi village - Christian & nonchristian.
- ④ Christianity practices and way of life promoted new value system like individualism, materialism, consumerism, etc.
- ⑤ These practices led to increase in expenditure on ceremonies, festivals which sometime led to season for indebtedness.
- ⑥ Decline of youth dormitories after missionary schools established in tribal region.
- ⑦ Patriarchy in family structure become more prevalent.
- ⑧ Christianity encouraged personal or private property or ownership. Hence Community values and property has undermined in tribal areas.
- ⑨ Erosion of old practices and value system. Hence loss of autonomy and identity crisis observed.

⑤ All these led to addition of complexities in socio-cultural life of tribals societies. As the Christianity embracing is sudden process, Hence find difficult to adjust in new system for tribals specially old generation peoples. (old age persons).

→ While many tribal societies undergone sociocultural changes due to Christianity, they are not considered as true Christian by mainstream Christians. They do not treat tribal convert or tribal Christians at par / equal with them.

Issues of Conversion :

- ↳ In many part of India, various cases of conversion have been reported over the period.
- ↳ Anti-Conversion laws has been passed by many states, so that tribals will be protected from forced conversion. e.g. Jharkhand, MP, Odisha laws.
- ↳ Recent Arunachal Pradesh anti-conversion law issue.
- ↳ Reason for conversion
- ↳ Incentive : voluntary or forced
- ↳ method of conversion
- ↳ Solutions to forced conversion.

Impact of Islam

Islam has marginal impact on tribal religious faiths and practices. It is followed by only around 0.5% of total tribal population.

↳ Islam has marginal presence among tribals mainly because :-

- ① It's fixed, rigid dogmas, which demands total rejection of tribal beliefs and practices.
- ② Lack of patronage from muslim rulers.
- ③ Not missionary approach
- ④ Muslim rulers largely pursued their imperial and political objectives.
- ⑤ It was left to Sufi-saints to preach and spread the Islam.

Geographical distribution :-

- ⦿ Siddis of Gujarat, Gujjars of Northwest Himalaya
- ⦿ Bakkarwals of J&K.
- ⦿ Some Bhils, Kotis and Dhankasi of Rajasthan
- ⦿ Almost entire tribal population of Lakshdweep
 Consist of seven muslim communities : Koya, Malmi, Melacheri, Manikban, Thankrafan, Thakri, and Raversi.

↳ It seems that Islam came to Lakshdweep from

the malabar coast. The main contribution in spreading Islam is considered that of 'Saint Ubaidullah at Androoth (Kerala).

↳ Evidence of this Malabar relations are: Arabic words assimilated into malayalam. Arabic script used for malayalam. Matrilineal descent also existed in some families of Lakshdweep Islands [Matrilineal societies exists in Malabar area-Tarawad].

Reason for accepting Islam:

- ↳ Islam has made inroad into tribal societies due to it's egalitarian nature, Nomadic culture.
- ↳ Other reasons for Islam embraced by tribals is contact of muslims (e.g. Lakshdweep), saint activities.

Impact of Islam :- Case study of Lakshdweep

by lila Dube

- ① It has been observed that matrilineal groups and matrilineal identity declined among them.
- ② Puberty rites for girls were given up.
- ③ Father assumed new responsibility in family (patriarchy)
- ④ New festivals with celebrating birth of prophet
- ⑤ Conformity to Shariat insisted, [language change]

- ⑥ Old rituals, are disappearing , folk dances are declining , ~~stop~~ ~~now~~ of new music, literature, food, dress, etc.
- ⑦ Islamic personal law prevails in conflicting cases.
- ⑧ Cross Cousin marriages are preferred in all 7 groups.
- ⑨ Practice of Monotheism, economic activities, charity practices .
- ↳ In tribal population Islamic Great Tradition are considered as paramount but local little Traditions of preconversion times are still popular It is not just observed in Lakshdweep but in other part of India too.
- ↳ According to Yogendra Yadav (1996) Islamisation connotes increased tendency among converts towards new identity formation based on increase in orthodox Islamic principle. in cultural life.
- ↳ Some orthodox organisations like 'Tableeghi-Jamiat' have been at front to remove these pre-Islamic cultural elements among new converts in order to maintain Islam purity .
Hence, despite it's highly dogmatic nature Islam was able to find some adherent in tribal societies.

Impact of Buddhism

Buddhism has very limited impact on tribal population. only few tribes come under Buddhism influence.

Buddhism preach peace and kindness among society. tribal societies in region connected to Tibet has been come under the Buddhism religion.

Geographical distribution :

- North West Himalaya : Bhots, some tribes of J & K (Ladakh)
- North East India : Bhutia, chakmas and Nagas, Lepcha, some tribes of Arunachal pradesh.

Impacts :

- ① No tribe has adopted new faith in totality. most of the tribes who adopted Buddhism continue following their social life of traditional Community.
- ② In these tribes, converted and non converted members lives together in same locality (No division like Khasi).

③ Tribes of Arunachal Pradesh living in high hills of Kameng and Subansiri and Siang district follow Mahayana Buddhism (Tibetan Buddhism), while the Khamti (foot hills of Lohit district) follows Hinayana.

↳ Those who have accepted Buddhism maintain a 'Gompa' - sacred place where image of Buddha installed. 'Lama' (sacred specialist) is attached to these Gompa. Every Singpho village has monastery locally called as 'Bapuchang'.

Case Study by Haimendorf (1983)

↳ Tribal people who accepted Buddhism, unlike the Christian converts among the Nishis those Khovas who are attracted by Buddhism, do not opt out of the social life of their community and they continue participate in traditional tribal rituals.

e.g: They adhere to tribal deity worship whose cult lies in hand of priest entirely distinct from Lama (incharge of Gompa) along with their traditional adherence they also follows Mahayana.

↳ Among Monpas ; Elements of ancient Bon religion coexist with dominant Buddhist faith.

Hence Buddhism is gradually penetrating their society in the realm of ethics and social organisation but local little traditions are too deeply embedded to be given up easily.

⇒ Thus various religions have impacted tribal societies in India. These are some cases of conversions and proselytizing activities. The tribal culture need to be protected from all sort of missionaries, Hindu or muslim conversion activities.

⇒ Let the tribal people enjoy their cultural autonomy, make their own decisions and participate in nation building process as equal partners in progress, retaining their self identity and self respect.

Reference : 'Tribal India' by Nadeem Hasnain

