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Tribes, Conversion and Sangh Virginius Xaxa

Abstract: The religious conversion issue has been the subject of major news headlines and controversies from time to time. Interestingly on every occasion that such controversies have erupted in India, the population at the centre of the debate has been the communities that have been generally called ‘tribes’. It was the issue of conversion of tribes in Madhya Pradesh that sparked off the first major controversy in Independent India in the early fifties. The issue of conversion there led to the setting up of an inquiry commission, known more popularly as the Niyogi Commission. The issue of conversion made major news headlines again in 1978, first with ‘The Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Indigenous Faith Bill’ and later with the ‘Freedom of Religion Bill’ that was introduced in the parliament by O.P. Tyagi. The bill aimed at regulating conversion at an all India level. Earlier the ‘Freedom of Religion Bills’ was passed in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh in 1967 and 1968 respectively. In Madhya Pradesh even before Independence, some princely states had already initiated enactments to ban conversion. These included the Raigarh State Conversion Act, 1936; the Surguja State Hindu Apostasy Act, 1945 and the Udaipur State Conversion Act, 1946.¹ What is interesting is that all these bills were introduced or passed primarily with a view to banning conversion of the tribes to Christianity. Even in the 1998-99 controversy on conversion, tribes have been on the centre stage of the debate.

Keywords: Niyogi Commission, Religious dialogue, Religious conversion, Tribals

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Tribes, Conversion and the Sangh Parivar

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The religious conversion issue has been the subject of major news headlines and controversies from time to time. Interestingly on every occasion that such controversies have erupted in India, the population at the centre of the debate has been the communities that have been generally called 'tribes'. It was the issue of conversion of tribes in Madhya Pradesh that sparked off the first major controversy in Independent India in the early fifties. The issue of conversion there led to the setting up of an inquiry commission, known more popularly as the Niyogi Commission. The issue of conversion made major news headlines again in 1978, first with 'The Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Indigenous Faith Bill' and later with the 'Freedom of Religion Bill' that was introduced in the parliament by O.P. Tyagi. The bill aimed at regulating conversion at an all India level. Earlier the 'Freedom of Religion Bills' was passed in Orissa and Madhya Pradesh in 1967 and 1968 respectively. In Madhya Pradesh even before Independence, some princely states had already initiated enactments to ban conversion. These included the Raigarh State Conversion Act, 1936; the Surguja State Hindu Apostasy Act, 1945 and the Udaipur State Conversion Act, 1946.¹ What is interesting is that all these bills were introduced or passed primarily

with a view to banning conversion of the tribes to Christianity. Even in the 1998-99 controversy on conversion, tribes have been on the centre stage of the debate.

Concept of Tribe

In order to place the issue of conversion among the tribes in proper perspective, it is necessary to locate their social setting. The use of the term 'tribe' to describe a certain category of people in India began during colonial rule. It was, however, not clear in what sense in which the term was used, at least in the initial stage. There were instances of 'tribe' and 'caste' being used either interchangeably or even in cognate manner. Despite the synonymous and cognate use of the term, the British did view the segment of the population that later came to be more generally described as 'tribe' as different from the dominant sections of the Indian society. That this was so could be inferred from the nature of administration they aimed at evolving for the tribal areas. Laws in force in respect of the general population were not usually applicable in case of such groups and communities. More often than not special laws, that is, laws in consonance with the traditional 'tribal' system of administration were

framed for their regulation and governance.

Hence, when the attempt was initiated to provide detailed and classified information about people in India following the introduction of the census, the difference referred to above became handy for the British administrators. The groups/ communities seen as different from the dominant communities were by and large categorized as tribes. Yet, when an attempt was made to conceptualize the basis of such categorization, the British were far from clear as to the basis on which the two types of communities could be differentiated. This is obvious if one looks into the censuses. In the 1891 census, for example, the term used was not 'tribe' but 'forest tribe' and that too as a sub-heading within the broader category of 'agricultural and pastoral castes'. Since 1901, however, a somewhat clearer criterion began to be used. Tribes were identified and described as those who practised animism, later the expression 'tribal religion' was used in its place. The criterion so introduced was continued in the subsequent censuses with the exception that there was qualification by other dimensions as well. Through descriptions such as the 'Hill' and 'Forest' tribes or 'primitive' and 'backward' tribes, the tribes were being categorized as falling into different types. What was considered common was that they all practised a form of religion that was different from the one practised by the dominant sections of Indian society. That is, tribes were identified as those who did not adhere to religions such as the Hinduism, Christianity, Islam etc. In the case of Hinduism, however, if groups were

shown to be Hindus in beliefs and religious practices, they were also viewed, as constituting a social organization that was markedly different from those of tribes. They were considered to be part of the caste social organization as against those of tribes. The dimension of caste thus assumes central place in the religious tradition of Hinduism.

While drawing up the list of tribes with a view to giving them certain political and administrative concessions, the consistent application of the criteria towards defining tribes took a back seat. The list of the scheduled tribes included in the Constitution had its genesis in these administrative and political considerations. After Independence, greater attention was paid towards identification of the criteria in terms of which tribes can be distinguished from the others. These include one or more of such characteristic features – as physical features, distinctive language, simple technology, distinct social and political organization, geographical isolation or combination of one or more of them. And yet, there has been no agreement over the use of these characteristics. Ghurye, for example, has shown how factors like religion, occupation and racial features have proved inadequate when attempt was made to distinguish the tribal people from the non-tribal people.² Thus, the question as to how the term tribe is to be used in the Indian context and what we mean by the tribal people is not easy to answer. In general, geographical isolation in the sense of living in forests, hills or inaccessible tracts, simple technology and modes of living etc. in one or more of such combinations have been taken as the crite-

ria for identifying tribes. And yet, there is a large number of groups and communities, which are identified as tribes but do not conform to attributes such as those referred to above. Many among them, in fact, share characteristics that approximate more to non-tribes than the tribes. Thus, tribes include within them a wide range of groups and communities differing in language, technology, geographical locations, ecological settings, level of development etc. In short, they stand at different stages of social formation. And yet, they have all been considered tribes mainly because, as Beteille puts it, they have been more or less outside civilization.³ They were outside civilization at the time when attempts began to be made on the conceptualization of tribes. It is indeed important to keep note of this aspect if one is to understand the issue of conversion among the tribes. Conversions, after all, draw tribes to the wider aspects of civilization.

Hinduism

Conversion may be viewed from several angles. Hence, it may mean different things to different people. I am, however, using the term conversion in the sense in which it is used in every day parlance viz. change from one faith and practices to another. Now in the sense of change from one religion to another, the transformation has been going on among tribes in India well before the onset of the colonial rule. All the same, it is with the coming of colonial rule that the conversion of tribes is generally talked about. In order to understand the issue of the conversion of the tribal people rightly, it is necessary

to place the issue in a wider perspective of transformation of the tribal societies.

Though the distinction is maintained between tribes and civilization, the two are not treated as isolates but in interaction with each other. Hence, the dichotomy posed between tribes and non-tribes is viewed as a distortion. The changes occurring in the tribal society due to interaction with the wider society has invariably been conceived in terms of tribes moving in the direction of becoming a part of civilization by getting assimilated or absorbed into the society the civilization represents. Both the historians and anthropologists have made such observations not only in the context of the past but also the present. Kosambi has referred to tribal elements being fused into the general society. Bose makes reference to tribes being absorbed into Hindu society⁴. Such a claim has not gone unchallenged as a large number of anthropological works of the post-Independence era still point to phenomena such as tribes being absorbed or assimilated into the Hindu society or tribes becoming castes. In this journey to absorption or assimilation, tribes are said to stand at different levels or stages. Nowhere is this better reflected than in the classification that sociologists and social anthropologists have provided of the transformation of tribes and tribal society.

The change in the direction of absorption into Hindu society is said to occur through certain processes that are far from uniform and identical. That this is so is evident from the range of terms used to capture the processes at work in the social anthropological literature. The

most common terms used are sanskritisation and Hinduisation. Of course the processes described by such terms overlap in actual empirical reality and hence there is a tendency among social scientists to use them interchangeably or synonymously. Often, the difference expressed by these terms is covered under the use of such generic terms as acculturation, assimilation, absorption etc. It is in relation to the processes denoted by these terms that the change in tribal society has been mainly studied. And because of these processes tribes have invariably been described or conceptualized in the literature as those absorbed into Hindu society. Accordingly, they are said to have accepted the ethos of caste structure and have been absorbed within it. They are treated as hardly differentiable from those of the neighboring Hindu peasantry.

The study of the transformation of tribes into Hinduism/caste has led to a concern with other kind of related issues. These are issues like the kinds of forces that compel tribes to come under the influence of the non-tribes and the nature and types of interaction they enter with them. With regard to the manner in which such transformation has taken place, there exists some controversy among scholars in India. The controversy has gained momentum after it has been claimed that the tribes are aggressively being absorbed into Hindu society. It is argued that there was frictionless co-existence between tribes and non-tribes until the 19th century, but since then as a result of the spread of railways and roads, land hungry peasants, traders and moneylenders pen-

etrated into the tribal areas, exploiting them on the one hand and on the other compelling and coaxing them into accepting their own cultural traditions and values⁵. The question that arises is whether the Hindu civilization was tolerant up to the 19th century and became intolerant only later. Now on this issue there are diverse views among the scholars of Indian society. Studies of the history of Indian civilization show that the growth and expansion of Hindu society was a prolonged and complex process, both forcible and peaceful, of absorption of the tribal people into the Hindu society. In fact, history discloses various methods of tribal absorption or assimilation that was adopted by different societies at different times or epochs.⁶ It was, however, not the aggressive but the peaceful process of absorption that has generally been highlighted in the literature on tribes in India.

The transformation of the tribes under this process has been conceived to occur through certain methods that have been diversely conceptualized among the scholars. Kosambi considers the adoption of the technology of the Hindu society by tribes to be the major method of getting integrated into the Hindu society⁷. Bose talks of the Hindu method of tribal absorption. This, according to him, takes place mainly under the system of the organization of production based on caste. For Bose the system is based on mutual reciprocity and hence its characteristic feature has been cooperation and not conflict. Hence, under the caste system of production, productive activities of the various castes were protected against competition from other castes. It is this that

the tribes found attractive in the system, according to Bose, and were drawn to the system, although it entailed low status for them within the caste hierarchy.⁸ The other significant method of tribal absorption into Hindu society is what Sinha calls 'state formation'. He states that the process of acculturation, Hinduisation and social stratification within the village could not be properly understood unless they were examined in the broad context of the formation of the principality. He further writes that the formation of the state provided the decisive socio-political framework of the transformation of the tribal systems into the regional caste system⁹. Some have even considered sanskritisation as the method through which tribes are integrated into the Hindu society. To me, this seems to be more of a process than method, which occurs only when tribes are drawn into the larger society through processes that are economic and political.

Under these methods the transformation of tribes and their absorption into the Hindu society was a long and protracted process. The process of acculturation to a new culture including religion followed as a corollary of increasing economic and political contacts of the tribes with the larger society. The process was slow, gradual and spontaneous. The term used to describe this process is generally known as sanskritisation. It is a process whereby a group lower down the hierarchy tries to adopt the life-style of the group above it. In the context of tribes, the term has been used to understand the process of acculturation to the value and customs of the dominant society. Hence, it was

far from easy and clear to mark when this transition could be said to have been made. There was also no intermediary or outside agency involved in this process and hence transition was said to be made without any aid from outside. The transition has been therefore broadly described as natural. Given the fact that the acculturation is slow, gradual and natural and that Hinduism, besides being a religion, also represents a particular social framework. In fact, it is difficult to conceive of Hinduism outside this framework. Hence, the acculturation process at work among the tribes is not considered to be confined to mere life-style but to go beyond and form an integral feature of the caste structure of Hindu society. In view of such features of acculturation processes, the term conversion can hardly been used to depict changes in the tribal societies. The terms that have been frequently used in the context under reference have been absorption or assimilation into the Hindu society. The transformation of tribes in the context under reference has thus been in the direction of fusion with the larger society, which invariably entailed loss of the autonomy and identity of the tribal society. If at all there was an identity then it assumed the form of a caste identity within the wider framework of the structure of the Hindu society.

Christianity

Next to Hinduism, it is to Christianity that one can see the phenomenon of conversion of the tribes in any substantive scale. The conversion of the tribes to Christianity is spread over the length and breadth of the country. Yet the conversion of tribes to Christianity

is far from even. It varies both across regions and communities. Its presence is more strongly felt among some communities and regions than others. Except for Northeast India and to a lesser extent the Chotanagpur plateau of central India, the presence of Christianity among the tribes of India is by and large not strong.

The conversion of tribes to Christianity, unlike that of the non-tribal population, began during the colonial rule and continues on some scale even today. Hence, considerable concern and anxiety has been shown over the matter in certain social and political circles. This concern over conversion, in fact, is the real concern but it is camouflaged under the garb of the means employed, on which Christianity can easily be attacked. It is important to note that the concern over the former holds no legitimacy unless it is shown to be linked with the latter. The Christian missionaries have been accused of using methods that have invariably been considered to be bad and unjustified. These methods are cited as those of inducement, coercion, fraud etc. Now as was the case with Hinduism, the conversion to Christianity among the tribes too took place by certain methods. These were in striking contrast to the methods adopted under Hinduism that have already been discussed above. The characteristics of the methods were however more or less similar to those at work in the context of Hinduism. They were aggressive, forceful and coercive on the one hand and peaceful, free and frictionless on the other. What, however, has been most impressed upon in the public mind in the context of Christianity is that the meth-

ods adopted by it were and are invariably one of force, coercion, intimidation, allurements etc. While the use of such means could not be ruled out both in the context of past and also present, what is important to bear in mind is that these were and are not the dominant patterns of conversion of the tribes to Christianity in India. If these were to be the dominant patterns, Christianity would not have been able to sustain itself among the tribes, as it has been able to do for so long. The Christian missions have also been attacked on the ground that they were/are engaged in the mass conversion of the tribes. Mass conversion refers to conversion of a group en bloc. In the context of tribe, it may mean either the whole tribe or a village or segments of it. It is worth noting that until recent years there was little differentiation in a tribal village other than those based on clans/lineage. Yet conversion of a tribe or a village or a clan/lineage as a whole was hardly a reality. What was a reality was that significant portions of a village or a group of families made a decision to join the new religion. This they did either by following a kin leader or a decision arrived at democratically by a group of families. The common thing in such conversion was the desire to keep and maintain the social bonds of a group or families. Such conversions assumed the form of mass conversions only over a period covering many years. It is very difficult to find a lineage/clan or village that has embraced the Christianity as a whole. One can therefore hardly talk of the mass conversion of the tribes in India.

While the employment of means considered unfair, unethical or illegal has not been altogether absent in history and may ever be practised even today, these do not constitute the dominant methods of conversion used by the Christian missionaries. The more common methods used by them have been what may be called developmental and social service oriented works. These comprised mainly, to begin with, education, health and medicine, legal aid, credit etc. In more recent years they have moved to other fields as well. These range from agricultural development and harnessing of water resources to increasing articulation of the issues of the tribal people's aspiration such as autonomy as well as those that have been drastically affecting their life such as displacement and rehabilitation. The extension of legal aid, in the face of distressing land alienation, was in fact one of the main methods through which conversion was sustained in Chotanapur during the colonial period. These methods acted as a powerful means of deliverance or emancipation of tribes from the oppression and exploitation of the rajas, zamindars and moneylenders. These methods also emancipated them from the clutches of ignorance, illiteracy, superstition, and diseases and opened up the way for reaping and enjoying the benefits of development and modernization. In fact, it was this emancipatory role of Christianity, especially from the exploitation and oppression of outsiders, that was the moving force behind the spread of Christianity in Chotanapur¹⁰. Only when Christianity/ the Christian missionaries were perceived as not going far enough in this

task viz. deliverance from the British was resentment aired and articulated towards Christianity¹¹. Birsa Munda and his movement's problem with the Christian missionaries precisely lay in this. The spread of Christianity among the tribes of the Northeast India too may be to a great extent explained in reference to the articulation of the similar issues inherent in the structure of their respective societies. That this may have been the case is inferred from the fact that it was the commoners that found Christianity the most attractive in this region too. At least this was the case in Mizoram and even the Khasi Hills. In both these regions, the Chiefs were opposed to conversion and were against it. It was the commoners who embraced Christianity¹². However once Christianity had made its foothold, there arose other factors that drew tribes increasingly to Christianity in the later phases. In short, the methods under which conversion to Christianity took/takes place among the tribes in India may be better summed up in Bose's observation viz. the Christian missionaries were perhaps the first people from whom the forest tribes of Chotanapur could claim their rightful status as human beings¹³.

It may be further noted that any conversion invariably entails some interests. They may be material or ideal. But even when there is pursuance of such interests, it may not be without loss of some other interests. These again may be either material or ideal. Conversion was often followed by great loss of many rights that the convert had earlier enjoyed in the community. The converts were often denied food, shelter, inherit-

ance, succession as well as participation in rites and rituals of the family and the community. They were at times excommunicated from the community. There was thus both gain and loss in conversion to another religion. It invariably entailed weighing of the pros and cons before decisions were made. The fact that conversion also entails some loss is too often ignored. Even in the context of Hinduism, Bose refers to tribes being drawn to Hinduism in exchange for protection and social security. Conversion hence requires to be treated more as an exchange than pursuance of a simple one-sided self or group interest¹⁴.

While these constitute the methods under which conversion generally takes place, conversion to Christianity is invariably, unlike in Hinduism, effected by a priest or a missionary. This is in marked contrast to the phenomenon of conversion to Hinduism. In the case of the Hinduism, the transition is more of a process than the event. It is slow, gradual and staggered over many years. It almost takes the form of a natural process. As against this, in conversion to Christianity, although some process is invariably involved, it is marked more by an event and hence transition from one to other can invariably be located and identified. The other interesting thing about the conversion of tribes to Christianity is that the transformation of the tribals has never been all-encompassing. Rather than entailing transformation in all dimensions of social life, as has been the case with Hinduism, the transformation is expected only in a selected or limited aspect of the total social life. The change or shift was gener-

ally related with only those aspects of the social life that were considered religious in nature or had religious overtones. Hence, while there was change in respect to one or more of the social aspects, there were other aspects, both structural and cultural, that were common among the converts and the non-converts. The converts, for example, continued with their languages, food habits, rules, customs, traditions etc. that were an integral part of the social organization of tribal society. The surrender of the old was thus never total. A tribal, even when he was/is converted to Christianity and was/ is expected to live a particular way of life, he was/is expected to do so without surrendering his membership of the wider community, whether it is described as tribe or otherwise. The transformation thus did not lead to a total break from their erstwhile and traditional community. Neither did it lead to an absorption or assimilation into an alien society. This is however not the case with Hinduism.

Religion involves both faith and practices and binds all those who adhere to it into one moral community. Conversion, as observed earlier, invariably led to the formation of new social groups. This had/has certain implications for groups and communities within and outside, and, therefore, also for relationships among them. Conversion entailed observance of not only new rules and practices but also abandonment of some of the old ones of the community. Even though converts retained much of the attributes in common with those of non-converts and maintained some continuity with their traditional social structure, the changes that were

enforced following conversion brought about a rupture in the relation between converts and non-converts. This no doubt partly stemmed from the religious teachings of the new religion but much of it was rooted in the style of life that the converts imposed upon themselves. In this they were greatly aided by the missionaries. To begin with, the converts abandoned many customs and practices. At the same time they observed many others. And while they did observe these others, they did so in total isolation from the rest of the community. The missionaries discouraged and even prohibited the converts from socializing and mixing with the non-converts. Through such exclusive living the converts completely isolated themselves from the rest and formed an exclusive group. They developed a feeling of superiority vis-a-vis the non-converts and even looked down upon the non-converts. Due to the edge that the converts enjoyed over the non-converts, in respect of education, occupation and modern values and exposure, this sense of superiority further widened the gap between the converts and the non-converts. The result is that there is a big divide between the converts and the non-converts today. Indeed there is hardly any social space left between the two to enable them to come together to revive or evolve common ties. In fact, the only platform that the two shared together was confined to the domains of politics, but even here there has come about a rupture now. Both the groups had in past rallied strongly behind the Congress. All the same, even here differences were already visible, but it had not crystallized into distinct identity.

With the erosion of the common platform, the cleavage and antagonism that was hitherto dormant have now come in the surface, and the differences are now not only ideologically being articulated but also politically exploited.

Conversion and the Sangh Parivar

At the level of politics and ideology the differences have given rise to a new orientation to the conception of tribes in India. The conception hitherto dormant and latent came to the surface during the recent attack on the Christians in India. In the course of media coverage on attacks on the Christians, it was time and again forcefully and aggressively articulated by the activists of the Sangh Parivar that the tribals cease to be tribals once they become Christians. It was also articulated that they must register themselves as Christians and not as tribes when they apply for jobs and other benefits from the government. The implication is that when they become Christians they cease to be tribes, and are, therefore, ineligible to apply for state benefits as tribes. Now such a conception of tribes not only goes against the general anthropological knowledge of tribes, however diverse they may be, but also against the basic conception and spirit underlying the Indian Constitution.

Individuals have been identified as tribes because they belong to groups or communities which have been enumerated as scheduled tribes in the Indian constitution. These groups or communities in turn are scheduled as tribes not because they practise a particular religion but because they constitute a particular

community distinct from the dominant regional community. They generally speak their own languages and have a distinct social organization and way of life that is quite different from that of the regional community. They may also happen to practise their own religions. Tribes are thus differentiated from the non-tribes not only on the basis of religion but also other elements that we have referred to above. Even when they have been drawn into the larger social structure and have become considerably differentiated among themselves in terms of income, occupation, religion, world-view etc, they do not cease to be members of the community they belong to. An individual enjoys the status of a tribe by virtue of being a member of a particular community and not because of the status of being an animist or Hindu or Christian. The denial of the constitutional provision to certain members of the community just because they have come to practise another religion goes against the very spirit of the Indian Constitution.

By bringing religion to the forefront of the conception of what constitutes tribes, the Sangh Parivar shows marked continuity with the colonial tradition. And yet there is a departure in certain respect from that tradition. In the colonial literature tribes were no doubt conceived in terms of religion but they were also seen in conjunction with other dimensions. What is new as far as the advocates of Hindutva are concerned is that they have begun to conceive tribes solely in terms of religion. Yet even here the advocates of the Hindutva are different from the colonial tradition. Under the colonial tradition tribes were

classified as animists and hence belonged to a religious tradition other than those of major religions of India. The advocates of Hindutva, however, conveniently overlook the fact that tribes have distinct religions of their own. They have in fact begun to categorize them as the Hindus.

The tendency of Sangh Parivar to conceive and identify tribes as Hindus is based on the observation made many years ago on the subject by G.S.Ghurye, a noted sociologist and the Niyogi Committee Report that endorsed the observation made by Ghurye. Since then it has become a constant refrain among the right wing Hindu social and political activists. This is done on the ground of somewhat similar religious observances and practices between groups identified as tribes and the backward sections or castes of the Hindu society. Ghurye in his book, 'The Aborigines "So-called" and Their Future' made arguments in justification of describing the tribes as Hindus; the expression he used was the 'backward Hindus.' The book, since then, has come into print under several editions with a new title called 'The Scheduled Tribes'. He made this argument on the ground that there was much similarity between the Hindu religion and the animistic tribal religions that the two could not possibly be distinguished from one another. He made this point based not on fieldwork data collection but on observations and comments of the Census Commissioners between the period 1891-1931 where they had expressed their dissatisfaction over the fact that tribes were described as animists¹⁵. It is of course an open truth that Ghurye made his observation on very inadequate

data and very selective use of the comments and observations of the Census Commissioners.

The categorization of the tribes as Hindus leads to difficulties both conceptual and empirical. To begin with, whether tribes are to be treated as Hindus is a debatable question. There are both similarities and differences in the religious practices of the Hindus and tribes. The protagonists of Hindutva have, however, conveniently overlooked the differences. Even on similarities, it is not tenable to treat tribes as Hindus. The similarities have been drawn based on two sources. One is the influence of Hinduism on tribes and the other is similarity due to the fact that both are to a greater or lesser extent natural religions. There is no doubt that there has been much give and take between the two religions. However, the influence of Hinduism on tribes, though necessary, is not an adequate ground for describing tribes as Hindus. The other reference made is the dimension of natural religion. As a natural religion, tribal religion shares many attributes in common with the religious practices of tribes in the Americas or Africa as also with Hinduism in India. Yet it is doubtful if the religious practices of tribes in the Americas or Africa can be described as Hinduism and those tribes as Hindus. To categorize tribes as Hindus in the event smacks of cultural and religious imperialism. Just because there are some similarities, tribes cannot be denied their distinct identity and autonomy. Secondly, if tribes are to be treated as Hindus then the whole historical process depicted by the historians to understand Indian civilization is open to contest and

even rejection. And so would be the case with the conceptual apparatus such as Hinduisation, acculturation, assimilation, absorption that have been developed and used to understand the dynamics of Indian society. Hinduism is intricately linked with the structure of caste and it is not so much against religion as against caste, that the social organization of tribes has generally been posited in social science literature. This makes it impossible for a tribal to be a Hindu and member of a tribe at the same time. He can be a Hindu only at the risk of losing the tribal status. The two cannot go together. He can, of course, acquire a new status but that is of caste rather than of tribe. At the same time while tribes continue to undergo changes of many kinds, these are no longer in the direction of caste. The changes in the direction of caste and therefore to Hinduism had a set-back, if not a halt, during the colonial period despite the fact that it opened up the floodgate for contact with people from outside. This was so mainly because Hinduism was no longer able to give the protection to the tribes that Bose has referred to above. Rather it led to domination and subjugation of tribes on the one hand and their oppression and exploitation on the other. Instead of continuing to become cooperative as was considered to be the case, Hinduism became competitive and exploitative. In addition to this there were other factors that arrested this development. Of these the administrative and political concessions extended by the colonial state and the spread of modern education introduced by the Christian missionaries, often with the help of the colonial state,

were the most decisive. While this was the case with Hinduism, the phenomenon was quite the other way round with Christianity. The Christian missionaries addressed themselves to a great extent to the problems created by the movement of the Hindu population. It was hardly surprising that the tribes were increasingly getting attracted to Christianity. By posing the issues of exploitation, oppression and domination that had become common in the relationship between tribes and non-tribes and by addressing such issues as health, disease, education and language etc., Christianity heightened the mark of identity of the tribes as against those of the larger society, especially the Hindu population. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Christian missionaries have been accused of depriving the aborigines of their Hindu heritage or obstructing the natural florescence of the tribes towards Hinduism.

Despite this claim of natural florescence for Hinduism among the tribes, the social and political activists of Hindutva have been building pressures, working out strategies and manipulations both at state and local levels to ensure that tribes return themselves as Hindus and not as animists or the followers of the tribal religion in the cen-

sus enumeration. Through measures such as these, the tribes have been coerced and socialized to declare themselves as Hindus. This has been done by removing primarily the separate enumeration of the category of animists and minor religions, as was the practice in the census before Independence¹⁶. Pressures and manipulations in this direction that began during colonial period have been maintained in the period after Independence. By ensuring the return of religion only in terms of the major religions, tribes were coerced to return themselves as Hindus if they were not practitioners of a religion such as Christianity, Islam or any other major religion.

As observed earlier, tribes were conceived as tribes primarily against civilizations, which in the context of India were marked by Hinduism or Islam. This being the case, it is rather absurd that one could talk of reconversion in the context of tribes as the advocates of Hindutva do. They can in fact talk of only conversion from tribal religion to Christianity or from Christianity to Hinduism. If one were to talk of reconversion then it would only mean conversion from Christianity/Hinduism to a tribal religion.

Notes

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Conversion: Psychological Perspectives

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Conversion, as a religious phenomenon, is a subject that has fascinated psychologists for nearly a century. In fact, conversion was “the earliest major focus of the psychology of religion.”¹ However, this early understanding of religious conversion is very different from the popular connotation the concept has in the current controversy in India. The psychologists viewed conversion as a transformational process with profound changes in self-concept and self-experience. In the current controversy in India conversion is understood more as a change of religion; there may or may not be a personal transformation.²

The psychological dimensions of religious conversion are complex and can be understood from a variety of perspectives. The scope of this article is limited to the following: it first presents an overview of classical psychological understanding of religious conversion and then attempts a psychological exploration of the phenomenon of religious conversion and the controversies surrounding it in contemporary India. It seeks to present an explanation of the motivational dynamics operating in the convert, the missionary, and the antagonists of religious conversion. This explanation is based on the insights provided by Self Psychology, a dynamic

relational theory of human development formulated by Heinz Kohut (1913-1981)³ and further developed and refined by his colleagues and students.⁴

Classical Understanding of Religious Conversion

Even though Sigmund Freud sought to dismiss religion as “an illusion,”⁵ many well known psychologists have explored the phenomenon of religious conversion. G. Stanley Hall delivered a series of public lectures in 1881 at Harvard University on the topic of religious conversion. Much of the material he covered was incorporated into his two-volume study of adolescence.⁶ James H. Leuba, a student of Hall’s, published the first journal article on conversion in 1896.⁷ The following year Edwin Starbuck, another student of Hall’s, wrote an article on conversion.⁸ Starbuck wrote a book on the topic in 1899.⁹ William James devoted two of his Gifford Lectures to the specific topic of conversion.¹⁰ Conversion has continued to hold the interest of psychologists.¹¹

These psychologists regarded conversion as a radical transformation of self. Conversion was seen as bringing about “a radical reorganization of identity, meaning, and life”¹², and a correspond-