Letting the Converted speak: Towards an Emic Approach to Conversion

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Ever since Prime Minister Vajpayee called for a debate on conversions, there has been a flurry of articles in the press either defending the 'right to convert' or violently criticizing 'forced conversions'. Most of the articles however are written by journalists and several have political or polemical overtones. The issue continues to be severely clouded with bias and emotion. There is also a vast scholarly literature on the topic of "missiology" and "conversions" but it is mostly historical in nature. In addition, the topic has been dealt with politically, theologically and even psychologically. There remains nevertheless a great deal of ambiguity. To my mind, the ambiguity concerns two sets of issues: 1) regarding the facts about 'conversions' and 2) regarding the explanations for 'conversions'. A sociological perspective may help clarify issues and lay the groundwork necessary for understanding the real focus of the debate. Using a socio-historical method, this paper will begin by clarifying these two types of problems: factual problems and explanatory problems. Only after this is done can the basis be laid for a true and open dialogue about conversions.

2000-01-01

Updated on Nov 10, 2020

Letting the Converted Speak...

Towards An Emic Approach to Conversion

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Ever since Prime Minister Vajpayee called for a debate on conversions, there has been a flurry of articles in the press either defending the 'right to convert' or violently criticizing 'forced conversions'. Most of the articles however are written by journalists and several have political or polemical overtones. The issue continues to be severely clouded with bias and emotion. There is also a vast scholarly literature on the topic of "missiology" and "conversions" but it is mostly historical in nature. In addition, the topic has been dealt with politically, theologically and even psychologically. There remains nevertheless a great deal of ambiguity. To my mind, the ambiguity concerns two sets of issues: 1) regarding the facts about 'conversions' and 2) regarding the explanations for 'conversions'. A sociological perspective may help clarify issues and lay the groundwork necessary for understanding the real focus of the debate. Using a socio-historical method, this paper will begin by clarifying these two types of problems: factual problems and explanatory problems. Only after this is done can the basis be laid for a true and open dialogue about conversions.

I. Facts about Conversions

The first question concerns *factual data. Is there really an exorbitant growth of Christians? Are conversions to Christianity taking place?* If yes, to what degree? To answer these questions, we need to turn to Census data. Taking a look at the six major religions of India and their growth from 1951 to 1991, this is what we discover.

Table 1: India: Population by Religion

	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991
Muslim	10.00	10.70	10.76	11.21	12.12
Sikh	1.74	1.79	1.89	1.96	1.99
Buddhist	0.05	0.74	0.70	0.71	0.77
Hindu	84.99	83.51	82.72	83.19	82.41
Christian	2.35	2.44	2.60	2.45	2.32
Jains	0.45	0.46	0.47	0.48	0.41

Census of India: Religion Tables :1951-1991

Of the six religious communities shown in the table, there are three which show a gradual growth: Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists; of these the growth of Muslims is highest. From 10.00 percent in 1951, it increases to 12.12 percent in 1991. Likewise, there are three religious communities which display a slight decline in growth: Hindus, Christians and Jains, of which the Hindus show the greatest decline: from 84.99 percent in 1951 to 82.41 percent in 1991. The fact however remains uncontested that the percentage of Christians has actually dropped from 2.35 percent in 1951 to 2.32 percent in 1991. It is a very slight decrease no doubt, but it is a decrease nonetheless. In fact, speaking of actual numbers, while the growth rates of the population during 1981-1991 among Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and Sikhs were 22.78, 32.76, 35.98 and 25.48 per cent, it was only 16.89 per cent in the case of Christians.[1] So the first fact is that there has been no geometric growth of the Christian population from 1951 till today.

We turn now to the 'other side of the coin': *the decline of Hindus*. Is the Hindu population currently declining? And if so, where is the decline taking place? To answer this question, we first need to clarify the question of *who is a Hindu*, as the number of Hindus is intimately tied to the question of *who is a Hindu?*

The amorphous nature of Hinduism: According to the Census Reporter of 1891, the term 'Hinduism' is only "justifiable by convention and definable by a process of successive exclusion. For the purposes of the Census it has been defined as the anti-thesis of Islam and includes all Indian forms of faith in which are detected signs of the worship of idols.[2] According to several Hindus themselves, Hinduism is not a religion in the Western sense of the word, it is an entire cultural system, a "way of life". The great French scholar of Hinduism, Monier-Williams, spoke of the ancient fortress of Hinduism with its *four* sides, Monotheism, Pantheism, Dualism and Polytheism,[3] and Nirad Chaudhuri, a Bengali Hindu, himself speaks of the evolving nature of Hinduism giving rise to at least three types: Archaic or Vedic Hinduism, Brahmanic or Classical Hinduism, and finally Contemporary or Neo-Hinduism.

Further, since Hinduism has no prescribed characteristics of creed, cult, code or community, it becomes difficult to consider as *one religion,* as *one unbroken strand* existing from 4000 or 3000 BC until now; or as *one monolithic religion* prevailing across the length and breadth of India, from among the northern-most Himalayan tribes to the southern-most fishermen of Kanya Kumari. If Hinduism then is not *one* religion, but a "league of religions", then the classification of "who is a Hindu" becomes contentious to say the least.

The Origin of Tribals: The second question pertinent to the decline of Hindus is the classification of tribals. Do tribals belong to the category of Hindus? Or are they Animists? The number of Hindus in the Census will depend on the way these questions are answered.

Since the Census of 1891, tribals were marked separately under the cat-

egory of Animists. The definition of Animism as given then by Dr. Tiele is as follows:

"Animism is the belief in the existence of souls or spirits, of which only the powerful acquire the rank of divine beings and become objects of worship. These spirits are conceived as moving freely through earth and air, and either of their own accord, or because conjured by some spell, appear to men. But they also take up their abode in some object."[4]

Thus, the notion of Animism was just as vague and amorphous as the notion of Hinduism. Often, the distinction between the tribal form of faith and some types of Hinduism was extremely elastic. Further, with the gradual 'Hinduization' of tribals, it became extremely difficult to separate Animists from Hindus.[5] While some believe that tribals are Hindus, most anthropologists are of the opinion that they have a separate history and belong to a separate category.

According to the latter theory, the tribals were the original inhabitants (or Adivasis) of the land. After the invading Aryans conquered the land and imposed their hegemonic culture and caste system, these indigenous peoples were forced to flee to the forests. Those who did not were incorporated and assimilated into the dominant Brahmin culture.[6] "Once a tribe came under the influence of the Brahmin people and was converted into a caste enjoying monopoly in a particular occupation, a strong tendency was set up within it to remodel its culture more and more closely in conformity with the Brahmin way of life".[7] According to Bose, it is

absolutely certain that some *jatis* are undoubtedly of tribal origin.[8] At times, the process of assimilation involved incorporating tribals gods into the Hindu pantheon.[9]

Other tribals kept their independence, refusing to worship in temples, with no priests and no holy books, having their own rituals and festivals, and maintaining their egalitarian gender structure.[10] Yet, even these were gradually "Hinduized" through organized festivals and Sanskrit symbols and rituals. "It is well known that the process of Brahmanizing (Hinduizing) has been long and continuously in progress amongst tribes, so that those who dwell in closer proximity to the plains are already affiliated to the Brahmanic faith."[11] This process of converting tribals to Hinduism goes on even today with great vigour by organizations such as the Hindu Jagran Manch.[12]

· **Problems of Classification:** Since the 1931 Census, "Animism" was abandoned and replaced by a new category "Tribal Religions". After independence, Census enumerators have been told to write in the religion column whatever the tribal states as his or her religion. The question asked is "What is your dharma?" The term "dharma" is generally not understood by the tribal and so often the enumeration depends on the whims and vagaries of the enumerator. It is a categorization more by the enumerator rather than by the adivasi (tribal) respondent.[13]

A new development: What is new in the last few decades is that the tribals who were enumerating themselves as Hindus or as Christians in the past, today

are asserting that they have their own religion and are asking to be enrolled within the category of "Other Religions and Persuasions". Their number has been increasing and the 1971 Census carried a special statement on the distribution of all those who said that they belonged neither to Hinduism, nor to Islam, nor to Christianity or any of the six major religions, but in a special category. They asserted that they had their "own religion" whatever it was called (sometimes called by the name of the tribe). Table 2 shows the distribution of persons who opted for the "Other Religions Category" according to state.

Table 2:

Percentage of those claiming other religious persuasion (different from the major six religions) by state
Census 1971

States	Percentage
Bihar	44.72
Meghalaya	14.56
Arunachal Pradesh	13.58
West Bengal	8.89
Nagaland	4.95
Orissa	4.21
Manipur	3.81
Maharashtra	3.66
Gujarat	0.86
Tamil Nadu	0.28
Rajastan ·	0.20
Andaman & Nicobar	0.06
Andhra Pradesh	0.05
Madhya Pradesh	0.04
Kerala	0.03
Delhi	0.02
Mysore	0.02
Punjab	0.02
Uttar Pradesh	0.02
Goa, Daman Diu	0.01
Himachal Pradesh	0.01
Chandigarh	N
Dadra & Nagar Haveli	N
Haryana	N
Jammu & Kashmir	N
Laccadive,Minicoy & Amindivi Islands	N
Pondicherry	N
Assam	-
Tripura	-

The above table shows that 44 per cent of those who claim their own version of religion are from the tribal population of Bihar. Next is Meghalaya with (14.56), followed by Arunachal Pradesh, (13.58), West Bengal (8.89) Nagaland (4.95) and Orissa (4.21). In other words, large groups of tribals in certain areas are claiming that they have their own religion and do not wish to belong to the traditional religions. To confirm this point, a select sample of the numerically larger tribes viz., the Hos, the Mundas, the Oraons and the Santals were studied to understand the pattern of how they enumerated their religion in the states of Bihar and Orissa.[14]

Select Individual Tribes by Religion – 1961 – 1981

Hos of Bihar: Table 3a   *Hos of Orissa: Table 3b*

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
1961	26.15	0.54	73.30	99.97	0.02	0.00
1971	21.45	1.14	77.40	86.76	0.44	12.79
1981	16.33	1.43	82.22	81.48	0.87	17.63

Mundas of Bihar: Table 3c

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
1961	53.73	26.23	20.02
1971	48.57	25.71	25.70
1981	45.56	27.76	26.72

Oraons of Bihar: Table 3d   *Oraons of Orissa; Table 3e*

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
1961	58.34	23.84	17.81	76.16	23.83	0.00
1971	61.13	23.73	14.02	64.31	21.00	14.82
1981	45.63	26.60	23.50	61.41	37.12	0.54

Santals of Bihar : Table 3f   *Santals of Orissa: Table 3g*

	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions	Hindus	Christians	Other Religions
1961	91.47	-	6.74	99.61	0.01	0.34
1971	85.31	1.78	11.74	86.48	0.07	13.49
1981	82.75	·3.17	14.08	53.41	0.35	46.23

What is clearly noticeable among the tribals in all the seven tables is that as the percentage of Hindus decreases, the percentage of Other Religions increases. In other words, there is an inverse proportion between the decline of the Hindus and the assertion of "Other Religions". What appears to be happening is that the tribals are stating that they are no longer Hindus. Some are stating that they are Christians, but an increasing proportion wish to assert for the first time their own tribal religion.

In the state of Bihar, in 1981 as much as 82.22 per cent of the Hos (table 3a), 26.72 per cent of the Mundas (table 3c) and 23.50 per cent of the Oraons (table 3d) returned "Other Religions" as their category and among the Santals of Orissa 46.23 per cent returned "other Religions" as their category. Except in one case, the Oraons of Orissa, there was a drop from 1971 to 1981 in the "Other Religion" category and that was compensated for by an increase in the number of Christians. As for the Khasis, the Garos, the Mizos and the Nagas, most of them claim to be Christians. (Unfortunately, the 1991 census data relating to the distribution of the scheduled tribes by religion professed is not yet available.)

So, the statement that Hindus are declining in the Census is very ambiguous. What is true is that the tribals, who in the past were classified as Hindus, today are claiming (because of influences yet to be determined) that they have their own religion or (as in the North-Eastern states) that they are Christians. This then is the heart of the problem. So the question "Are Conversions taking place?" should be turned around to read "Why are tribals desiring to enumerate themselves as Christians?"

But before we answer that question, we first need to ask: Why is the image created that Christians are growing in numbers? There are three reasons for this:

1. **The past**: One reason of course is that in the past, specifically in the nineteenth century, from about 1840-1901, Christians grew by leaps and bounds.. This extraordinary growth however is largely due to the mass movements of the depressed classes, who embraced predominantly Protestant Christianity mainly in the South of India, but also in other parts.[15] These movements however were the result of a specific socio-political context in the nineteenth century and this has been well documented by historians.[16] But that was a long time ago.

2. **The present**: A second reason for the impression that Christians are growing is because of the high concentration and rapid growth of Christians in the 4 states of Manipur (34.11 per cent), Meghalaya (64.58 per cent), Mizoram (85.73 per cent) and Nagaland (64.58 per cent). However, these are very small states with a total population of 0.70 per cent (less than one percent) of the total population of India. And the total number of Christians in these 4 states is only 0.4 per cent of the 816 million people of India;[17] in other words a minuscule figure. Yet it has been projected as 'eye-catching' probably because tribals are concerned. By contrast, even though the actual num-

ber of Christians in the traditionally Christian-dominated states of Kerala and Goa has dropped considerably (Kerala saw a decline from 20.85 per cent in 1951 to 19.32 per cent in 1991) and Goa, Daman and Diu witnessed a decline from 36.26 per cent in 1961 to 32.78 per cent in 1991), this decline does not count for as much "in the public eye" as the high visibility of Christians in the numerically smaller four North Eastern states.

3. **Fundamentalist trends:** A third reason for the image that Christians are increasing is because of certain "Fundamentalist" Protestant Evangelical groups. Some of these groups are as fundamentalist and ethnocentric as the Sangh Parivar, believing in the literal inerrancy of "their" Scriptures, in a ranking of non-Christian and Christian civilizations in a hierarchical framework, where to be different is to be inferior.[18] These evangelical groups tend to disparage other religions and often come across as aggressive and militant in their evangelizing work.[19] Their activities often arouse criticism from Christians themselves and from caste Hindus, who are unaware of or fail to make any distinction between fundamentalist groups and others. Arun Shourie, for instance, who is otherwise quite knowledgeable about the history and theology of Christianity, in his book "Missionaries in India" speaks repeatedly of the efforts of "the Church" in North-East India as though "the Church" was a homogenous body and not a diversity of denominations with different and varied ideologies.[20] It is precisely such a facile identification of groups with such differing perspectives

that cloud the topic of conversions. In places like Nagaland and Mizoram, evangelical groups outnumber Catholics, for instance, by a ratio of 10 to 1.[21]

It has been shown that in the last two decades Christianity as a whole in India has not grown. There is just a small pocket of the North East where it has a conspicuous presence and the tribals there are claiming to be Christians. We now come back to our original question: why do tribals want to declare themselves Christians? Why are tribals eager to convert to Christianity?

Explanations for Conversion

There is a host of explanations for conversions. It is precisely an area where most of the research has focused on. The literature is replete with theories trying to identify possible causes. Roland Robertson identifies *push* and *pull* theories: (*push* theories focus on background conditions of the converted, *pull* theories emphasize what convertees seek to get out of conversion).[22] Snow and Machalek classify the literature into three waves of conversion theory - the first wave dominated by theological-psychological explanations, the second wave featured development of the "brain-washing" or "coercive persuasion" model and the third wave signaled reliance on sociological thinking.[23] The above sociologists however have in mind largely "individual conversions" which are more common in Western countries, whereas the focus in this paper is on "group" or "mass" conversions, pertinent to the Indian context. Beginning from the last century, there are a large number of historical case

studies describing the mass conversion movements of various depressed classes that took place in different parts of India. Frykenberg however complains about the lack of theoretical framework in such historical studies.[24] More recently, Vempeny in a topical book, describes about 14 different styles of conversion practices - ranging from street preaching to militant outfits and from social action to ashram style missions."[25] but his aim is polemical. Saldanha provides perhaps the most cogent and consistent taxonomy with his 'different patterns of conversion'.[26] In this paper, I would like to use a very simple principle, based on the sociology of knowledge, to classify the different explanations for conversion. According to the social construction of reality,[27] all explanatory theories are constructed according to a particular point of view thus giving rise to at least three types of explanations:

- Explanations from the Converter's point of view

- Explanations from the point of view of those who "feel" they are losing membership

- Explanations from the Converted group's point of view

All these explanations are not to be understood as water-tight compartments, but merely as heuristic devices. It is perfectly imaginable that some kind of overlapping might also exist; it is possible that in the case of one group one explanation may apply, but for another group, a combination of explanations might be more fitting. For Louis Rambo, conversion is "a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations." Thus, there is no one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process.[28]

Having said this, I now propose to describe some of the explanations that have been cited in the literature to examine which of them will be the most suitable for an explanation of why tribals want to convert to Christianity.

Explanations from the Converter's (Missionaries') Point of View:

1. Horton's Theory of pre-disposing cognitive orientation:

Writing mainly about African religions, Horton is of the opinion that conversions take place because of a predisposition in the attitudes of the converted.[29] Horton discovered a belief in a two-tiered structure among African tribes: 'the first tier being that of the lesser spirits and the second that of the supreme being.' 'The lesser spirits,' he suggests, 'underpin events and processes in the microcosm of the local community, while the supreme being underpins events and processes in the macrocosm i.e. the world as a whole. The world of the lesser spirits was especially appropriate in communities, which were comparatively isolated and dominated by subsistence farming. However, as these communities became increasingly exposed to the wider world and as communications improved, people began to feel the need for more satisfactory systems of 'explanation, prediction and control'. The atttention paid to the lesser spirits slowly shifted

to a focus on the character and cult of the supreme being – towards a cosmology which appeared to be more meaningful and appropriate in the macrocosm. Notions of a supreme being however were already present in Christianity and Islam, thus offering a world view which would better equip the tribal person to cope with the problems of the wider world.'. This, according to Horton, is one of the factors, which led to African tribes embracing Christianity.

Horton's theory proposes two variables:

> Pre-conversion beliefs and ideas which predispose a group to accept the worldview of a new religion. There must be a foundational framework for the new religion to latch on to.

> The impact of modernization as a catalytic force that triggers or speeds up the process of conversion or movement from one fellowship to another.

Thus, the historian Lal Dena suggests that one of the factors enabling the tribals of the Manipur and Lushai hills to accept Christianity was their cosmological belief system. Though Animists, they believed in a Supreme being (*pathien*) and found it easy to reconcile the Christian idea of a Supreme God with their own idea of a Supreme Being (the same word *pathien* is used).[30] Similarly, Richard Eaton, uses the theory of Horton to explain the quick rise of Christianity in Nagaland.[31] The Nagas today are almost 95 per cent Christian, 90 per cent belong to Protes-

tant denominations and less than 5 per cent belong to the Roman Catholic Church. The second variable, the modernizing force, in the case of tribals, is provided by the missionary schools and social work programs. These have introduced the tribals to the modern world stimulating a new consciousness in them. The problem however with Horton's approach is that it is too intellectualist and does not sufficiently take into account socio-economic factors.

2. Caste or Status Mobility Theory:

The second theory, called the Caste or Status Mobility theory, was predominantly used by historians to account for the numerous mass conversion movements to Protestant Christianity in the last century. The theory concerns mainly the depressed classes, whether the Nadars or Ezhavas of Travancore, or whether the Malas or Madigas of Andhra Pradesh. It has even been used to explain the conversion movements of the Mahars of Maharashtra and the Chuhras of Punjab. These communities experienced indescribable discrimination at the hands of the caste Hindus. The classic example is that of the Nadars of Tamilnadu, who were caught in a social limbo somewhere between the Shudras and the outcaste untouchables. Hardgrave reports two instances of such discrimination: 1) Nadar women were not allowed to wear the breast cloth before the higher castes 2) The Nadars were not allowed to enter the temple of the caste Hindus.[32]

Thus, the avenues of caste mobility within the Hindu social system were closed to them. Sanskritization was a cul-de-sac because of concerted and ef-

ficacious rebuffs from the higher castes. The Nadars even tried to change their caste through the Census enumeration but were unsuccessful in their attempt. Hence, 'the weakening of social links within the community, set the depressed caste groups free to fend for themselves and to look for new patrons.'[33] It is no wonder that they joined the Anglican churches in large numbers. In the south, since, it was the Christian missionaries, who supported them in fighting discriminatory practices, the depressed classes became Christian. In the Punjab, depending on who supported them, the sweeper community of the Chuhras joined either Anglican Christianity or Islam; the Mahars, under the charismatic leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, chose Buddhism, since the latter religion, it was felt, was more native to India than Christianity or Islam.[34]

A significant factor in the caste mobility model is that it is not the lowest classes who first left Hinduism, but the classes that were just above the lowest rung.[35] They were the first to become economically independent and that gave them the necessary social strength to break away and join Christianity.

3. Identity Theory:

The third theory proposed in the literature is the *Identity Theory*. According to this theory, certain groups or communities experience a crisis or social dislocation. This results in a loss of identity and hence they choose a new religion, which is part of discovering their identity. A conversion movement then is like a kind of group identity crisis in which the group passes from a negative rejection of its lowly place in the Indian/

Hindu cultural system to a positive affirmation of a new religious identity. This new identity does not depend on its acceptance or rejection by the higher castes; indeed it has been chosen and sustained despite their refusal to accept it. Very gradually the new identity leads to significant alterations in behaviour and occupation and sometimes to an enhancement of status.[36] This explanation has been pertinently applied to the tribals of India, who have experienced a sense of loss of identity. Their loss of identity has a two-fold cause: economic and cultural.

Economic

Tribals were always excluded from the rest of Indian society. They lived in forests and hills with very little contact with modern society. Down the ages, they have been victims of exploitation. First, they were alienated from their land. When the British introduced the system of land ownership and revenue, annual tax was trebled which was beyond the paying capacity of tribal cultivators. As outsiders increasingly settled in tribal regions, money-lending practices soon became exploitative. Lacking written records, more and more of the tribals began to lose their land and became landless cultivators, soaked in debt. Next they lost the use of the forests. As a result of the draconian Forest Laws, they were deprived of their very sustenance, treated like strangers in their own environment.[37] Finally, came displacement as a result of mega projects. "Everywhere I go I find more and more evidence of the exploitation of the aboriginal by malguzars, traders, contractors and others..." wrote the Deputy

Commissioner.[38] For tribal peoples, their independence, self-respect and human dignity are closely linked to the forests and land. When these things are taken away from them, their very community and identity is under attack.[39]

Cultural

With Independence, the whole sub-continent of India was divided into various linguistic states. But this division of states did not take into account the tribal communities. As a result their communities were broken up and the various tribes scattered and divided. They became isolated. This was an enormous blow to their cultural identity. Further, the education system simply passed them by. Even today the level of education among tribals is very low. Literacy for males is 16.35 per cent as against 41.3 per cent in the general population. For females, it is 8.04 per cent as against the 29.4 per cent for the non tribals. Schools are only in the registers.[40] Consequent to the denial of education, the final attack upon their cultural identity came with the process of Hinduization. Through rituals, festivals and customs, tribals were absorbed into the Hindu cultural system through a gradual process of Sanskritization.[41]

Given this scenario, it is quite understandable that when the missionaries came in with their schools, the tribals began to enter the education system and gradually the process of modernization set it. Modernization brought with it questions of identity and an awareness of their exploitation. Bit by bit, the indigenous peoples developed a consciousness of themselves as a tribe. One of the first expressions of this new found

identity was to declare themselves in the Census as either Christians or as followers of their own tribal religion.

The missionary J. Clough narrates a similar process that took place among the Madigas, lower caste peoples in Andhra Pradesh, who were helped by the missionaries during a food crisis. "Vast number of Madigas came seeking not so much material help as human dignity." When Clough tried to dissuade them from Baptism, a cry arose from every portion of the crowd. "We do not want help. By the blisters on our hands we can prove to you that we have worked and will continue to work. If the next crop fail, we shall die. We want to die as Christians. Baptize us, therefore."[42]

The above three explanations are all from the Missionary or Converter's point of view. The next set of theories emanate from those who "feel" that they are losing adherents. (The words *"feel" that they are losing adherents* is crucial.. Others have called them the "defector group" or the "loser group" or the "mono-culturalists" (One religion, one culture) but all these are 'unhappy' terms. According to a prominent group of anthropologists, tribals are not really Hindus; hence, to consider them 'defectors from Hinduism' would not only be misleading but inappropriate.)

Explanations from the point of view of those who "feel" they are losing membership

1. Force, Threat or Coercion:

The first theory of "force" or "coercion" has been used as an explanation

for conversions that took place in the past. It is not very popular with social scientists as it is difficult to find adequate proof. This theory has been used to explain the conversion of some Buddhists into Hindus at the turn of the century, the conversion of some Hindus into Muslims under the Mughals and most recently the conversion of the Goans by the Portuguese. In most instances, the term force is to be understood in an "indirect" manner. The Portuguese, for instance, granted a series of privileges to those who converted and denied them to those who did not. The letter of Miguel Vaz, to King John of Portugal, suggested the following measures: "idolatry was to be disallowed, temples were to be destroyed, Hindu festivals to remain uncelebrated, Brahmin preachers to be debarred from the island." King John of Portugal gave his approval to these measures.[43] Other methods used was the Christian upbringing of orphans and the method of outcasting persons, (making them eat beef for instance) and thus obliging them to turn to Catholicism.[44]

At the present time, there are scarcely any reported instances of "conversions to Christianity by force". However, there are instances of tribals being converted to Hinduism by force. (called Reconversion) Thus, the Hindu Jagran Manch in Gujarat has gone about converting tribals to Hinduism through the method of force or by instilling fear. They have distributed leaflets making false allegations against Christian priests. One leaflet contains the following words: "wherever Christian priests have gone in the world, they loot people.

They teach people to tell lies...to steal in the name of religion.. Awaken Hindus! and struggle against these thieves who lie, who rob you of your rights and bring these people to their senses.."[45] More directly, the HJM launched a campaign to harass and pressure those Christian tribals in Gujarat who did not agree to the "Reconversion" ceremony. Fourteen incidents were reported in the press or in police records of harassment. Christians were beaten up, stones thrown during the Sunday prayers, houses and hospitals were damaged, bibles burnt, prayer houses razed to the ground.[46] These are instances of blatant force. Many such stories of "forcible conversions" were reported by the Human Rights Watch Report. Interviews of tribals conducted on site report them as saying:

"Once police protection goes away we will kick you out of your houses. If you don't convert we will burn you and your house. We will destroy your church."[47]

Similar stories are also reported by the All India Federation of Organizations for Democratic Rights.[48]

2. Inducement or Allurement:

Inducement or Allurement is a second explanation for conversion, put forward by those who "feel" that they are losing membership. It is a common allegation made against Christian Missionaries by Hindus who belong to the Sangh Parivar. Virulent attacks have been made against missionaries (vide the three Anti-Conversion laws in the three states of Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and Arunachal Pradesh). It was an allegation subscribed to by Gandhiji[49]

when he had in mind a certain type of missisonary. It was also made against Mother Theresa with regard to her 'anxiety to save souls'.[50] It refers to the motives of the missionaries as well as to the methods used by them. Primarily, the accusation consists in giving material help to destitute or poor people so as to entice them to become Christians (the so-called 'rice' Christians). In its broadest sense, it has been interpreted to include all forms of education, medical help, social work and social animation. These too are liable to be considered as allurement if the motives behind them are "to convert". The rationale behind this allegation is that marginalized people, whether tribals or from *the depressed classes*, because of *their socio-economic status* are in a susceptible state and in this state of simplicity, they are more receptive to conversion. The allegation is considered to be proven when, after the material aid ceases, the converts relapse into their former religion. Obviously, the allegation is not applicable to missionary schools and programs run for the *educated middle and upper middle class* Hindus.

Examples from history include the famous statement of Abbe Dubois, speaking of his converts. "Two thirds were pariah and the rest were Sudras, who being without resource, turned Christians, in order to form new connections, chiefly for the purpose of marriage, or with some other interested views."[51] This explanation was also used post-eventum to describe the Karta bhajas' conversion to Anglican Christianity. 3000 of them from Krishnagar,

Bengal, were baptized as Anglicans during a local famine. But their motives were supposedly mixed. J. Long, in his *Handbook of Bengal Missions*, reports: 'With Christianity they found pity as also money and rice which they did not obtain from the zamindars' But by 1857 large numbers of converts had relapsed and a number of mission outstations had to be closed.[52]

By way of contrast, the Parava caste of pearl fishermen around the southern tip of the Peninsula were much harassed and oppressed by the Arab pirates and powerful Hindus. Duncan Forrester theorizes that they sent deputations seeking Portuguese protection and offering to adopt Christianity as a kind of *quid pro quo*. By 1537 practically the whole caste had been baptized.[53] However, the fact that there are hardly any relapses shows that material help was not the only motive.

The same allegation of allurement has also been labeled against the Prarthana Samaj, which was established because its founders felt that the conversion of the untouchables to Christianity was a big loss to Hinduism. The Samaj devoted itself to educational and social work among the untouchables and tried its best to lure the untouchables back to Hinduism.[54] Many secularists, however, and even those from within the Hindu fold, question this broad interpretation of the allurement thesis. 'If lower caste people or tribals wish to change their religion because of material or compassionate help, what harm is there? they ask. 'In religion as in all things, there is no one whose motives are absolutely pure. The paths by which

people move closer to God are diverse and if this is the way that tribals choose, who are we to interfere?'[55]

3. Fraud or deception:

This last explanation, from those who "feel" that they are losing members, is not so much an explanation as an allegation. "There has been no known or proven instance of conversion by force or fraud" says the Report of the All India Federation of Organizations for Democratic Rights.[56] This explanation is therefore used to describe events in the past. Primarily it refers to the 'De Nobili experiment' (even though he himself may not have been aware of the interpretation given to his strategy).[57] De Nobili believed in the 'filtration strategy' i.e., first convert a few upper caste Brahmins and the other castes will follow suite. His experiment is considered to have failed though a few Brahmins and upper caste Hindus were converted in the South of India. De Nobili himself dressed in saffron, wore the Namaam, ate vegetarian food and lived in an Ashram. He believed that Christianity had to shed its 'colonial' trappings and incarnate itself in the native Hindu culture. Today the modern followers of De Nobili believe in an "inculturated" Christianity, an "Indianized" Church and some of them live in Ashrams, even though their motive is not to convert. However, disbelieving the motives of such experimenters some caste Hindus[58] are very wary of the whole process of inculturation in Christianity and label the Ashram movement in Christianity a subtle form of deceptive Sanskritization, a strategy "of

apparently identifying with Hindus with the ulterior motive of eventually converting them".

Explanations of Converted Groups:

Finally we come to the last group of explanations. These are explanations that arise from the converted peoples themselves. And here we find a big lacuna. *We hardly have any explanations at all.* We do have autobiographies, but these are only of individual, mostly spiritual, conversions like those of V.N. Tilak, Nilakantha Goreh, Ram Chandra, etc[59] But there are scarcely any explanations for *group conversions* from the "converted' group's point of view. We do have statements of individual tribals, like the one quoted in the *Indian Express* of Jan 31,1999, "We will choose a religion that will help us live!" but there are hardly any explanations (from the perspective of the tribals) as to the social forces that make them want to declare themselves Christians. A genuine exception is the book *Christianity and Social Change in North-East India* by David Snaitang, a Khasi.[60] More of such books are needed. It is the contention of this paper that at the present time, most of the debate about conversions is polemical, is between two groups – the converter and those 'claiming' defections – both trading explanations and allegations from their own perspectives. For the dialogue to be truly fruitful we need to engage the 'converted' themselves and draw them into the debate.

One reason of course for the lack of theory is that there is a very low education among tribals. Nonetheless, there is a great need to listen to indigenous

peoples' *oral* reflections on their own conversion experiences, word-of-mouth explanations as to why they chose Christianity or why they wish to identify with their own ethnic religion. When the converted, i.e., tribals and lower castes are allowed to voice their own opinions, then the debate will become a 'dialogue' and the real issues will come to light.

In cross-cultural research, the literature distinguishes between two primary approaches - etic and emic approaches.[61] An **etic** approach is an outsider's approach. It examines many cultures, compares them and tries to arrive at universals, commonalities, general principles and explanations. The theory is created by the analyst. An **emic** approach, on the other hand, is an insider's approach. It studies behaviour from within the particular, specific system. It does not look for "universals" in that it examines only one culture in depth. In the emic approach, the theory, principles and explanations arise from the culture itself and are "discovered" rather than created by the analyst

It is only when emic explanations of "conversions" abound; when the tribals explain in their own language and in their own manner whether they changed religion because of force, fraud or inducement or because of cognitive pre-disposition, status mobility or a genuine search for identity or for reasons completely unthought of before, it is only then that a rightful move will be made in the direction of dialogue.

In the last century when depressed classes started embracing Christianity 'en masse', there was a hue and a cry about conversions. However, when leaders of these groups, like Ambedkar, voiced their own reasons and explanations for conversion, the hue and the cry stopped. Today indigenous peoples are changing their religion. When they start giving their version or their own explanation of why they changed religion, then again the hue and the cry will stop.

A longer view of history tells us the same thing. When the caste structure became too oppressive, various groups from within Hinduism reacted; first, it was the Buddhists and the Jains. Next it was the Sikhs; during the period of the Mughals, it was the Muslims; recently it has been the turn of Christians.[62]

The economist and columnist Swaminathan S.A. Aiyar made the very same point in an open letter to Mr. Govindacharya, the Sangh Parivar ideologue:

Your real problem in competing is not that Christians are using money or false advertising. It is that traditional Hindu society has behaved so abominably to some of its members, notably Dalits and tribals, that they seek a rival religious brand. As long as this persists, not all the wealth of Hindu temples and not all of the fancy miracles of Babas will stem the defection of disillusioned consumers of your product to rival brands. Some have gone to Islam, some to Buddhism and some to Christianity."[63]

Notes

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3. Nirad Chaudhuri, *Hinduism*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1979, p. 117.

4. Quoted in the Census of India, J. A. Baines, General Report of 1891, p. 157.

5. Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India*, ASA Publications, New Delhi, 1994, pp. 188-189.

6. Mentioned in the different Census Reports of India: Baines (1891), Risley (1901), O'Malley (1911) and Shoobert (1931).

7. Quoted in S. Michael, *Anthropology of Conversion in India*, Institute of Indian Culture, Mumbai, 1998: 7.

8. Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Culture and Society in India*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1967, p.208.

9. Jayant Lele, *Hindutva: The Emergence of the Right*, Earthworm Books, Madras, 1995, p.xviii.

10. Joseph Valiamangalam, "Conversion in Indian Religions" in Eds. J. Mattam & S. Kim,. *Mission and Conversion a Reappraisal*, St Paul's Publications, Mumbai, 1996, pp.132-133; P. R. Ram, *In The Name of Religion*, Ekta, Mumbai, 1999 p.12.

11. J.A. Baines, *Census of India, General Report of 1981*, p.158.

12. Ghanshyam Shah, Conversion, "Reconversion and the State: Recent Events in the Dangs", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Feb 6-12, 1999, Vol.xxxiv No.6, p.317.

13. *Ibid.* p. 314.

14. For the next set of tables I rely on the figures provided by B. K. Roy Burman, "The Other Side of Conversion", and also the Special Tables for Scheduled Tribes.

15. Henriette Bugge, "The French Mission and the Mass Movements" in G. A. Oddie, *Religious Conversion Movements in South Asia*, Curzon, Surrey, UK. 1997, p. 97.

16. For a small sampling see Fidelis de Sa, *Crisis in Chota Nagpur*, Redemptorist Publications, Bangalore, 1975; Frederick Downs, *Christianity in North East India*, I.S.P.C.K. Delhi, 1983; Robert Hardgrave, *The Nadars of Tamilnadu*, University of Berkeley Press, San Francisco, 1969; J. W. Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, Lucknow Publishing House, Lucknow, 1933 (2nd edition); G. A. Oddie, Religious Conversion Movements in South Asia, op. cit.; G. A. Oddie, Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movments in Medieval and Modern India, 1977, Manohar, New Delhi; G. A. Oddie, Social Protest in India; Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality in India*, Manohar, Delhi, 1989; Henriette Bugge, *Mission in Tamil Society*, Curzon, Surrey, UK, 1994.

17. *Census of India, 1991*, Religion Tables pp. xii ff.

18. *Asian Age*. Dec. 3, 1999, 'Spotlight'.

19. James Barr, *Fundamentalism*, Westminister Press, Philadelphia, 1978; Ed. Lionel Caplan, *Studies in Religious Fundamentalism*, Macmillan Press, Hong Kong, 1987; Bruce Lawrence, *Defenders of God: The Fundamentalist Revolt against the Modern Age*, University of South Carolina Press, Columbia, S. Carolina, 1989.

20. Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India*, pp. 205-208.

21. This figure is arrived at from the 1991 Census data , from the data of the Catholic Directory of India 1990 and 1998 and from statistics of Protestant Denominations.

22. Roland Robertson, *Meaning and Change*, New York Univ. Press, NY, 1978, pp. 216-217.

23. David Snow and Richard Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion" in *Annual Review of Sociology*, 1984, No.10, p. 178.

24. R. E. Frykenberg "On the Study of Conversion Movements: A Review Article and a Theoretical Note" in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol XVII, No. 1, 1984.

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34. Eleanor Zelliot, "The Psychological Dimension of the Buddhist Movement in India" in Ed. G.A. Oddie, Religion in South Asia, 1977.

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46. Reported by Shah, *ibid*, p. 316.

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49. Arun Shourie, *Missionaries in India*, p. 16-17.

50. Arun Shourie, *ibid*, p. 8.

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