

Jharkhand: Terrain of Cultural Contestation

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When Vasco de Gama triumphed in finding a sea route to India in 1498, by landing on the Western coastal town, of Kozhikode(modern-day Calicut), a new era had begun in the Indian subcontinent. It was not simply the arrival of a Western traveller; it was indeed the beginning of the foundation of world trade and modernity. After having succeeded in establishing a sea route to India, Christian missionaries began to come to India to spread the message of the Gospel.

By its certain liberating principles, Christianity in the beginning was associated with modernity. The very foundation of modernity- freedom, liberty, equality, and fraternity assumed a primary place in the early stage of missionary activities. Moreover, when the missionaries began working among the tribal people of some of the very backward regions of India, Christianity received an enormous amount of support because these tribal persons were accorded very low status in the Hindu social order.

Determining a person's future purely on ascriptive status alienated a large chunk of the tribal population. So, the incidental, nevertheless, the active presence of Christian missionaries in the tribal region of Jharkhand ensured a massive support base for Christianity. It is important to highlight here the rise and spread of Christianity in Jharkhand. The German mission was the first to begin its activities in the Chhota Nagpur Santhal Pargana region by the year 1854.

The missionary society was founded by John Baptist Gossner in Ranchi in November 1895. There were no educated tribals in chotanagpur santalpargana region of Jharkhand. The members of the missionary society first establish a mission station in the important towns and from these mission stations they went around preaching the word of God.



After the 1857 revolt, the British government did not interfere in the work of missionaries. Having enough funds in their hands, the missionaries started chains of schools and dispensaries in the tribal area. By 1900, the number of Roman Catholic missions grew phenomenally from 15,000 converts in 1887 to 71,270 in 1990. In 1971 the total population of Christians in Jharkhand rose to 5,34, 007. At present 2000 Roman Catholics are active in this region. Missionaries run 450 schools and 300

hospitals in the Chota Nagpur area.

Role of the Church in Jharkhand

Church has played an important role in the life and politics of Jharkhand. It became the most important factor of cultural change in Chhota Nagpur Santha Pargana. It fought for the tribal cause and lent its powerful support to the demands of the tribal peasants for the restoration of land, the regulation of rent and the abolition of feudal dues. They were regarded as guardians and messiahs of the poor tribals. The Christian missionary generated among the tribals a consciousness of their past and presented exploitation and their rights and privileges. This could be gauged from the fact that all the leaders of this region from the beginning of the 20th century till two decades after independence were all Christians. Jaipal Singh went on to become a member of India's Constituent Assembly.

It was the misery and exploitation of aboriginal by the local zamindars (landlords), money lenders and Marwaris which prepared a fervent ground for the missionaries to spread the message of the Gospel. In the eyes of missionaries, the fundamental solution to Adivasi's worldly problem lies in the Christian faith. The missionaries concentrated their efforts on the major tribes particularly on the more affluent and prestigious sections among them. Their efforts were most successful among the Karia, Oraon and Munda tribes of Jharkhand. In the words of Sir M.G.Hallet, 'there is no doubt the great success of Christian mission in obtaining converts is due largely to the secular benefits which the Mundas thus obtain. The largest number of conversions took place in those areas where landlords subjected tribals to the worst kind of exploitation it ultimately paved the way to mass conversion in the Chhota Nagpur Santhal Parganas region of Jharkhand and the Bastar region of Madhya Pradesh. The two largest pockets of tribals in middle India.

The rapid spread of Christianity alarmed the zamindars who feared that it would check in the free exercise of despotic power which they had so long enjoyed. They began to look for an opportunity to drive away the missionaries from Chhota Nagpur Santhal Pargana. Christianity not only brought tensions between the Zamindars and the Christians but also divided tribals among themselves.

Institutional Responses

The increasing activities of the missionaries, reports of forcible conversion and increased pressure from the RSS led the Madhya Pradesh government to appoint a Commission under the chairmanship of BS Niyogi in 1952 to report on the missionary activities. the Commission observed,

"Evangelization in India appears to be part of the uniform world policy to revive Christendom for re-establishing Western supremacy and it is not prompted by spiritual moves."

They further stated that,

“The objective is apparently to create Christian minority pockets to disrupt the solidarity of the non-Christian societies and the mass conversion of a considerable section of Adivasi with this ulterior motive is fraught with danger to the security of the state”.

The report had wide ramifications for the future of Christianity and the missionaries in India. Hence they mounted enormous pressure on the government to stop the report from being made public. It could see the light only after 20 years from the date of submission. The fact behind this delay was that Christians were the major supporters of the Congress party ruling both at the centre and in the states then and Congress could not take the risk of antagonising them.

In the meantime, RSS, which was banned in 1948, was looking for an opportunity to recover its lost face and regain the trust of Hindus. It engaged itself actively in this region and opposed the church's activities. It demanded their expulsion from the Indian soil and sometimes physically disrupted the function of missionary schools. The RSS derived its sustenance in the region mainly from the businessmen service holders and traders who made their way in through various government projects which were established immediately after the independence. Tata and the Damodar Valley Corporation were the most important major investments in this region.

Political economy of the Jharkhand region

The growth of industries and government-sponsored projects coupled with the development of means of conveyance resulted in a massive influx of outsiders mainly from north Bihar cryptically referred to as Dikus hailing from ABCD district is Arrah, Balia, Chhapra and Darbhanga district of Bihar and Eastern UP. These outsiders first gained control over the economy and then started influencing the politics of the region.

But these activities failed to have the desired effect and the RSS decided to intervene in this region in an organised manner. In 1952 the RSS launched an organization called Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), a tribal welfare organization and deputed Swayamsevak to oversee its functioning and coordinate its activities for this purpose. It received liberal assistance from the local Marwaris and money lenders. Maharaja of Jaspur Madhya Pradesh was appointed the president of Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram.

These local businessmen and moneylenders were peeved at the way they were being targeted by the Christian tribals and missionaries. They were, otherwise, averse to the idea of tribal welfare and were directly responsible for the plight and misery of the tribals of this region.

The Vanvasi Kalyan ashram undertakes activities like opening up the one-teacher school mainly Shishu Vidya Mandir exclusively for the tribals where the education was free. They were taught in vernacular language. Health centres were opened for tribals and it encouraged sports activities to train tribal children in martial arts (with a motive to fight the armoury of Christians). Through its Shakhas (branch), the RSS tried to infuse the national spirit which would foster national unity as it perceived missionary and their activities as a threat to national unity. Aping Christian missionaries and their Bible, the RSS Pracharak went about preaching in the tribal areas with the Hanuman Chalisa and Ramcharitmanas.

They organised Ramayan Mandali and liberated several tribal places of worship from Christian missionaries to win back the tribal population to the Hindu fold.

One of the main aims of the organization is to assimilate tribal youth into the Hindu mainstream. Under the program called the 'Students Experience in Interstate Living' tribal students from remote areas are taken to cities and accommodated in the families of RSS sympathizers to make them familiar with the Hindu Parivar. Through its developmental and welfare projects, the organization and therefore the RSS has been able to enter the remotest of areas. By 1999 the organization had 12,000 branches all over India and in Bihar and Jharkhand alone 3000 branches were established. The organization runs 8979 projects.



The RSS concentrates, on welfare programmes for the tribals as they perceive tribals as being misguided by the missionaries and fear that one day this region will become Churchanchal (land of Church) if their activities go unchecked. The RSS asked the government to take some steps to check the further growth of missionary activities. With little support coming from the government side, it involved itself among the tribals.

The RSS believes that the tribals are a part of Hindu society, who have been neglected and misguided by successive Indian governments. According to RSS. The Indian government is further carrying the policy of isolation which was deliberately pursued by the British government to keep the tribals in check. The Indian government is accused of making rules regulations, and policies to segregate the tribals from the mainstream resulting in further alienation. The RSS considered it its civilizational duty to integrate the tribals into Hindu culture, which was increasingly being identified with Indian culture. RSS maintains that many of the religious beliefs, practices and rituals of the tribal population are borrowed from Hinduism. They are a part of Hindu society and therefore should be protected from conversion to Christianity but it maintains a mute silence over the status of the tribals in Hindu echelon.



The process of 'othering'

As a colonial cannon, it served the important purpose for the Britisher to keep Indians non-aligned. Post-independence it became an important strategy to play 'delusional politics'. Hindutva as an ideological construct, articulates the interest of certain sections of the population about others, whose interest it seeks to incorporate to achieve unity within classes and communities of a Hindu social order. Their unity is sought in opposition to the ideological other in this case, Christianity who are seen as an opponent that is gradually corroding the social fabric of India. It demonstrates how the masses can be kept under traditional caste dominance even in modern times by careful exclusion of economic and other interests and by emphasising culture, tradition and religion.

The grandeur of Cultural Politics

Jharkhand region is unique in the sense it is the site of all three important races, Mongolians and Caucasians. The intermixing of races has gone on for so long and so deep that it is difficult to discern any perceptible differences among them. The conversion to Christianity created a distinct upper class among the tribals, with the converts, having gained access to education through missionary-run institutions, cornering most of the government jobs. It created on the one hand schism in the tribal society and on the other hand it worked as a factor of cohesion and creating inter-tribal solidarity based on Christian denominational affinities. It was difficult for the RSS to get the support of the tribals with its homogenised Hindutva. Thus RSS was against laying greater emphasis on local culture as it divides the nation and encourages anti-national activities. In 1978 the 'Freedom of Religion' bill was introduced in the Lok Sabha. The bill sought to prohibit conversion from one religion to another by the use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means. Successive Legislations thereafter toed the same obiter dictum to punish 'forced conversion'. This proposal which was backed by the RSS and supported by Morarji Desai, was intended to offer tribals the protection of the state against the proselytization activities of missionaries. Morarji Desai later withdrew his support for the measure because of the agitation launched by Christian and the minorities commissions by the end of the 1980s.

By the end of 1980, we see an apparent shift in strategy. Bhartiya Jan Sangh was replaced by 'Bhartiya Janta Party', a party with differences. RSS focused their energy on that strategy which could have a beneficial impact on BJP's prospects. The process of Persuasion was replaced by the strategies of co-option and assimilation. The very act of conversion resulted in the popularization displacement and migration of indigenous ethnic groups the novel feature of this process of assimilation was to assign cultural autonomy to the newly integrated and lowly ranked tribes.

It is naïve to say that Christianity does not nurture any political ambition. As RSS has been able to establish a link with the Adivasis by giving some kind of economic incentives of course is no match to the material incentive provided by the Christians. Christianity on the other hand has been able to establish its image as the religion of the oppressed although the basic theme of Hindutva that of cultural unity and renewal was articulated in the region specifics where crafted to give it a greater appeal.

RSS and Tribals

As a general rule, tribals are not excluded from the RSS conception of the Hindu nation. The RSS message of unity and exclusion of foreign elements is specifically targeted against Christian tribals, the prosperity of the Christian tribals vis-à-vis non-Christian tribals makes this a potentially fruitful strategy. Besides the overture and lending support, respect and adulation to Brisa Munda is part of a strategy to rope in support from the tribals, who have so far nursed anti-feeling against it. Birsa Munda popularly called Birsa Bhagwan is a symbol of tribal identity and its importance lies in the fact that he fought against the British government and targeted Christian missionaries hence he becomes a symbol of tribal pride like the way the memory of Sivaji to invoke Maratha pride.

Symbol as strategy

The use of symbols in mobilization is not a new thing and as we know the khadi had become a symbol of swaraj during the nationalist movement. By its very existence, symbols do not possess any power. However, the interaction of economic conditions with cultural mediums nurtures certain symbols as signs of power but a symbol on its own has no meaning in politics unless we understand its capacity to track masses depends upon the relationship of that particular symbol with the socio-economic existence of the people. As rightly pointed out by David C. Kertzer in his book "Ritual, Politics and Power, people or cultures are not free to create any symbolic system imaginable, nor that all such constructs equally tenable in the material world.

BJP which earlier was drawing its support from the Marwaris, are now getting support from industrialist tribals and of course some sections of Hindu migrants. A broad-based coalition perhaps allows BJP a wider manoeuvrability and its studied silence and skirting of the issue of 'local vs outsiders', is a tactical ploy to be seen on all sides of the social spectrum, which has seen careful nurturance in Jharkhand. It's no wonder that BJP may bounce back in the next year's election as its holds among the carefully nurtured political constituencies continue to hold sway.

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The author currently teaches at Marwari College, Darbhanga. His particular area of interest lies in the field of political process, Public Policy and Human Rights. He has written extensively on the issues afflicting society. He has attended several seminars and presented papers thereof. He has worked for developmental organizations and media organizations. He has done MA and MPhil from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and is a law graduate from Delhi University.