

## Conversion of the “Vanavasis”

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**THE WRITER RECOUNTS THE VALIANT FIGHT OF THE TRIBALS OF THE NORTH-EAST AGAINST THE PROSELYTISATION BY THE CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES, SUPPORTED BY THE BRITISH IMPERIALISTS, WHO CONSPIRED TO SEPARATE THEM (VANAVASI, I.E. FOREST-DWELLING, HINDUS) FROM REST OF THEIR HINDU BRETHERN ON AN INVENTED THESIS OF EXPLOITATION OF THE ABORIGINALS BY THE SO CALLED “CONQUERING OUTSIDERS”, WHO IN FACT WERE THEIR CO-HINDUS.**

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“The end justifies the means”, so goes the Jesuit maxim. The Great Commission (Matt 28: 10) commands that all the people (ethne) of the world be discipled – that is enrolled in Christ’s army, or incorporated in his body, the Church.

But the world has changed. The colonialist connection of Christianity which was helpful in the good old days has become a stigma that refuses to go in keeping with the times. Christianity has got to be sold as the religion of the downtrodden. Hence, the need to negate, sanitize, distort and invent!

A recurring theme: The aboriginal tribes were marginalized and exploited by Hindus. The Christian missionaries appeared on the scene as saviors. Far from the missionaries using force or fraud to convert, it was the tribals who plumped for Christianity. Any nexus between the rulers and the missionaries was indirect.

How close was the nexus between the ‘neutral’ British rulers and Christian missionaries? “It is not only our duty”, declared Lord Palmerston, the Prime Minister, “but in our own interest to promote the diffusion of Christianity as far as possible throughout the length and breadth of India”. “Every additional Christian”, declared Lord Halifax, the Secretary of the state, “is an additional bond of union with this country and an additional source of strength to the Empire”. “They are doing for India”, as Lord Reay introducing a deputation of Indian Christian to the Prince of Wales, said “more than all those civilians, soldiers, judges and governors whom your Highness has met”. “They are the most potent force in India”. Declared Sir MacWorth Young (Missionaries in India: Continuities, Changes, Dilemmas, Arun Shourie, ASA Publications, 1994, p.109). In fact, the façade of neutrality was a convenient strategy. As Reverend Tucker told

the Select Committee on Indian Territories, in 1853, “I should be sorry to see the Government departing from its present position of strict neutrality. If the Govt. openly announces Christianity to be a part of the education it imparts, Christianity will immediately lose the high vintage point it now occupies”. (ibid, p.120)

Was the missionary concern for the ‘tribals’ born out of altruism? In his address to the Baptist Missionary Society in London in April 1883, Sir Richard Temple who had been the Finance Minister and Governor of the Bengal and Bombay Presidencies said, “...But what is most important to you friends of missions, is this – that there is a large population of aborigines, a people who are outside caste, who do not belong to any old established religions, who are not under the influence of bigoted and hereditary superstitions. These aborigines by their mind and conscience offer a surface like clear paper, upon which the missionaries may make a mark... If they are attached, as they rapidly may be, to Christianity, they will form a nucleus around which the British power and influence may gather. Remember, too, that Hinduism, although is dying, yet has force, and endeavors to proselytize amongst these people, and such tribes, if not converted to Christianity, may be perverted to Hinduism” (ibid, p. 99). In and around 1822, David Scott, Esq., the Commissioner of Koch Bihar first conceived the idea of Christianizing the Garo tribe of Assam. He wrote to Bayley, Secretary to Government, “I am satisfied that nothing permanently good can be obtained by other means (than sending a missionary) and that, if we do not interfere on behalf of the poor Garo, they will soon become Hindu or half-Hindu.” Secretary Bayley sent a most encouraging letter in reply closing with the words, “I do not think the favorable opportunity for making this

interesting experiment should be lost (Milton Sangma, ‘Garos Beliefs and Christianity’ in ‘The Tribes of North–East India’, ed. Sebastian Karotemprel, Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., 1984, Shillong, p.99).

Was the ‘tribal religion’ really separate from Hinduism? Who coined mischievous terms like ‘animism’ and ‘adivasi’ (original inhabitant)? V.J. Middleton in his thesis for the Fuller Theological Seminary makes a statement that Hinduism pervades practically every tribal religion. Rev. Chhangte Lal Hminga himself admits that the Mizos knew the story of Rama and Sita. At the foot of the Lushai (Mizo) hills, rudely carved idols of a God sitting cross-legged and a goddess standing as well a pagoda like buildings have been found towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Mizos believed in life after death (The Committee, Baptist Church of Mizoram, 1987, pp.12,35). Evidence of the prevalence of Hinduism and its cults of the sun and mother goddess in the Munda & Oraon region dates back to the early medieval age. The impact of Hinduism resulted in acceptance by the tribals of Siva as Mahadeva Bonga and Paravati as Chandi Bonga (K.K.Verma and Ramesh Sinha, ‘Socio-Political Movements among the Munda and the Oraon’, in “The Tribal World and its Transformation”, ed. Bhupinder Singh, J.S.Bhandari, Concept Publishing Company, p.4) Ear-boring and sacred-thread ceremonies are observed by the Gond of Ranchi. The Ranchi Gond are ideally supposed to put Ganga water along with some Tulsi leaves into the mouth of a Gond on his death-bed. The Gond offer worship to Mahadeva, Ram and Krishna. They honor the cow. They are emphatic to their claim that they are Hindus (Satish Kumar, ‘The Gond of Ranchi’, *ibid.* p.144). The Missing of Assam adopted the ‘Bhakatya Panth’ and recite religious verses of ‘Kirtana’ and other ‘Puthis’ (books) written by Shankaradeva and Madhab Deva (D.Doley, ‘The Tribes of North–East India’, p.92-93). The Lalung (Tiwa) tribe of Assam get their names from the Shiva’s Lal (Saliva). The Reang of Tripura perform Lakshmi Pooja, Ker Pooja, Tripurasundari Pooja and Chitragupta Pooja every year and have close interactions with Hindu Bengalis. The Hajong of Meghalaya have been following Hindu rites and customs. The origin of Hindu shrine of Kamakhya, near Guwahati is attributed to the

Khasis. Hindu deities like Ranachandi, Viskuram have found place in the Khasis Pantheon. The Khasis believe in re-birth. The Rabha of Assam worship the cow as a goddess. The Monpa (Tsanglas) in the south of Tibet trace their lineage to Guru Padmasambhava (Rimpoche). The above could simply have not been possible if the tribals had been marginalized by Hindu Society. In fact, the tribals are Hindus in their beliefs and modes of worship. It was the mischief of the British rulers and missionaries to label these Hindu “Vanavasis” as animists and detach them from the Hindu Society! The 1901 census noted in its report that ‘the dividing line between Hinduism and Animism is uncertain’. The 1921 census noted that it is never possible to say where the Animist begins and the Hindu ends. The 1931 Census abandoned the term ‘animism’ and replaced it by a new category ‘tribal Religions’.

The missionaries have popularized the term ‘adivasi’ for the tribals to imply that the non-tribals (read Hindus) are immigrants (like Mughals and British) and had chased these original inhabitants to the forests where the missionaries saved them. In fact, the proper term for ‘tribals’ should be ‘vanavasi’. Similarly, the term ‘Diku’ used by the Kolarian tribe was first coined by the missionaries to mean mainly the Hindus to imbue in the minds of the tribals the idea to look upon Hindus as exploiters (Singh, Bhandari, p.31)

Did the ‘tribals’ uniformly look upon missionaries as friends? Were the Hindus in the plains always looked upon as exploiters? The legendary Munda hero, Birsa who is revered as ‘Birsa Bhagwan’ was in fact dissatisfied with the teachings of the missionaries who hurt the feelings of the tribals by speaking ill of their religions and left his earlier association with them. Armed Munda under his leadership, in fact, timed an attack on the missionaries, landlords and police on Christmas Eve, 1899. Birsa caused apprehension among the missionaries and they prevailed upon the Govt. to arrest him and sentence him to 2 ½ years in jail (Singh, Bhandari, pp7,29). The Mizos had strongly resisted the missionaries. A popular heathen song “Puma Zar” had the following words to deride the Christian preachers “Carrying book, imitating foreigners, always proclaiming something, Puma!” (Hminga, p.87) What an

apt description! The attempt of missionaries to pressurize the khasi parents to send their children to schools provoked the ‘rebellion’ in the Jaintia Hills (1862-64) which was ruthlessly suppressed. Babu Jeebon Roy (b.1838), the first khasi to join the Government service started a literary movement to revive the ancient khasi heritage. The Seng Khasi movement was started in November 1899, for this purpose. Prominent Khasi personalities like Babu Sibcharan Ray (b.1862) focused on the close proximity between Khasi and Hindu religion. He edited a paper ‘U Nonphira’ which was critical of the British and the missionaries. He was an active member of the Congress and the Brahmo Samaj and had studied and translated Hindu classics like Bhagavad-Gita, Chanakya-niti-Darpana etc. into Khasi (Karotemprel, P. 331-332). A Hindu religious leader Bhagirath Babaji had sponsored the Kharwar or Sapha

Hor, a socio-political uprising amongst the Santals in 1871. The Heraka movement led by Jodunang(1905-1931) and later by the legendary Rani Gaidinliu among Zeliangrong nagas was a counter to the missionary activities which according to anthropologists like Elwin and Haimendorf had demoralized and destroyed the solidarity of the Naga by forbidding the joys and feasting, the decorations and the romance of communal life! The missionaries to this day, pose the greatest danger to tribal culture and national security in the sensitive North-East of our country. Missionaries insist that they are here to save our bodies and souls. God save us from being saved!

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