

Perception Regarding Conversion and Social Change Among Scheduled Tribes

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Abstract : Religion is a matter of life and death. A man does not change religion as he changes his clothes. He takes it with him beyond the grave. But today innumerable people are changing their original religion and converting to other religions. Majority of these are of deprived sections of the society, particularly Dalits and scheduled tribes. Most of the Dalits are embracing to Buddhism, where as scheduled tribes embrace to Christianity. In the beginning the tribals, who were despised by the Hindus as uncivilized, very backward group and looked down upon, the Christian missionaries provided with essential educational and medical services, they won over their confidence and affection. The sympathetic understanding shown by the Christian missionaries about the day-to-day problems and coming to their rescue and assistance at times of need has had its impact. Many tribals areas have come under the impact of Christianity more readily than with Hinduism. In many areas the native religious beliefs and practices of the tribals continued hand-in-hand with Christianity.

Keywords : Religion, Conversion, Scheduled Tribes

Introduction

In fact, the issue of tribal identity is not something new or a very recent phenomenon. In one stage, tribals preferred to follow the upper caste. Hindus in the process of Sanskritization, giving up many of their own traditional beliefs, values and customs just to include themselves in the Hindu fold. Then with the rapid industrialization tribals faced a different type of identity crisis. Change in their traditional economic spheres because of adopting many industrial jobs, resulted into the reorientation in tribal way of life with some structural and organizational changes too.

Since time immemorial. They live in isolation, observing a totally different value system, culture and life style, which have virtually remained unchanged since ancient times. Their economy also been independent of

wider economic system and mainly depends on the forestry, livestock and agriculture.

No doubt, Christianity has been an important factor of cultural and social change among the tribals. After baptism the mentality of the aboriginals began to change in an extensive way the value patterns of the indigenous way of life experienced a service confrontation with the newly development thoughts and ideas resulting from the change of religion. The territories, where Christianity took a deep based and wide spread role, become so much influenced that the physical as well as social setting of the tribal villages developed. In course of time most of the tribal groups came under the spell of the caste system which resulted in the formation of a large number of low – graded communities within the Hindu fold, many other have taken shelter to Christianity and by this way the despotic exercise of power

of the caste based society had been avoided. Thus Christianity appeared as a protective force to these ill-fated people.

Review of Literature

Danda (1988:327) says that, the processes today are not exactly the same as they were immediately before independence of the country, still it is a matter of gratification that due to exposure to the government sponsored programmes, particularly of education and development, the scheduled tribe in India, instead of feeling shy of or loosing their identity by way of absorption could become assertive about their right to maintain their independent cultural identity and at the same time become partner of the larger national whole on equal terms.

In this regard Pati, R.N. and L. Jagatdeb (1991) in their book tribal demography in India, have opined that education is essential for the socio-economic modernization of all the societies. It is one of the important keys, that unlocks the door of modernization.

The discussion of social change among the tribal communities in India will be incomplete without a discussion of the role of Christian missionaries. The missionary effort in education, health and proselytisation, was an important agency of starting for reaching social amongst them. As K.S. Singh (1978) has remarked, "Christianity gave them an ideology created a myth and a sense of history sharpened the feeling of separateness and emphasized identity".

Christian missionaries working in tribal areas were the first to start modern formal education among them in 1831, when the illiterate and ignorant folk was found to be exploited in various ways by the landlords, the moneylenders and non-tribals. It was against this background that the work of the Christian missionaries comes as relief to the tribals. G.E.L. Mission, S.P.G. mission and Roman Catholic mission were some of the important missions, which took a leading role in educating the tribals

by opening hundreds of primary and secondary schools in different tribal belts of the country.

Similarly the role of Christian missionaries was also notable, which brought about lot of changes among weaker sections and tribals in this context Nurullah and Naik (1951:427) have observed that "In Bengal and Assam the education of the tribal children has been partly taken up by the direct instrumentality of the state, but chiefly by the missionary societies with help and encouragement from the government".

Patel, Tara (1984:42) is also of the opinion that upto the end of the 19th century, the spread of education among the tribal people was very insignificant and that too only at the primary level. Later on, the missionaries, with the support of the government, continued their efforts. While most native states did not make any significant contribution towards the welfare of the aborigines, some of the advanced native states, such as Baroda, opened a new vista in the area of tribal education and welfare.

Similarly Kamat A.R. (1981:1282) has opined that with the spread of education the Christian missionary influence became predominant in certain regions while with the growth of nationalist movement Indian missionary influence became predominant areas. Inevitably their land started the process of consensus and conflict, of emulation of the dominant classes and of search for new self-identity.

Objectives

1. The study aims at understanding the perception of scheduled tribes P.G. students towards process of conversion and change in their social status.
2. The study proposes to understand the impact of conversion to enhance their status in the society.

Methodology

This study was conducted in four universities of Karnataka, which represent different regions of the state. The universities are Mysore university, Mysore, Gulbarga University, Gulbarga, Karnatak University, Dharwad and

Kuvempu University, Shimogga. The study is based on survey method to select samples quota sampling method was used. To collect the required information interview schedules were used. For the present study 300 scheduled tribe PG students were selected as a samples.

Limitations of the Study

The present study is confined only to post-graduate scheduled tribe students. The study covers the respondents from only four universities representing different regions of the Karnataka state.

Analysis

Christianity has been an important factor of cultural change among the tribals since the British rule. Initially the conversion begun at individual and family level and was an uphill task. It is significant to note that during the process of conversion the choice fell on the numerically major tribes. Sahay, K.N. (1967) said that the first impact of proselytization in the tribal areas was felt by the Khasis of Assam in 1813, the Oraons of Chotanagpur in 1850 and Bhils of Madhya Pradesh in 1880.

The impact of Christianity on the tribes of India has opened up a lot of changing situations. The converted tribals witnessed a rapid process of transformation.

After baptism the mentality of the aboriginals began to change in an extensive way the value patterns of the indigenous way of life experienced a severe confrontation with the newly development thoughts and ideas resulting from the change of religion. The territories, where Christianity took a deep based and wide spread role, become so much influenced that the physical as well as social settings of the tribal villages developed there in faced thorough change over. In course of time most of the tribal groups came under the spell of the caste system which resulted in the formation of a large number of low-graded communities within the Hindu fold, many other have taken shelter to Christianity and by this way the despotic exercise of power of the caste based society had been avoided. After getting lowly based position in the caste graded Hindu

society many transformed tribal groups had to face severe hardships created by the Hindu landlords in their large scale malpractices of snatching agricultural lands from the grip of the so-called socially upgraded tribals. They were faced to become daily wage earners under the disposal of these landlords. In this meagre income they hardly could escape from the greedy clutches of the money lenders. Christianity appeared as a protective force to these ill-fated people in that specific situation of degradation and oppression.

After the attainment of India's independence the tribal people of India have been focussed in a different perspective. It has been felt by the national government that the tribes of India are to be treated as the specific part and parcel of the traditional Indian civilization and as a necessary consequence, they should be integrated with the mainstream of national social system by means of directed developmental processes. In order to protect the tribals in the transitional phase some constitutional safe-guards have been provided by the government. Various measures have been adopted to help the tribes of India in developing themselves socially, economically and educationally.

Recent-past the process of conversion among scheduled tribes has gradually increased. As a result they are beginning to enter the main stream of social economic, cultural and political life. Therefore here an attempt is made to understand the process of conversion and its impact on the status of scheduled tribes.

Table 1

Social class and opinion regarding conversion to other religions

Sl. No.	Social class	Opinions			Total
		Yes	No	Not decided	
1.	Upper class	03 (8.3)	22 (61.1)	11 (30.6)	36 (100.0)
2.	Middle class	16 (11.5)	66 (47.5)	57 (41.0)	139 (100.0)
3.	Lower class	17 (13.6)	59 (47.2)	49 (39.2)	125 (100.0)
	Total	36 (12.0)	147 (49.0)	117 (39.0)	300 (100.0)

As far as social class is concerned a most of the upper class respondents do not want to convert to other religions. But among the respondents who have already decided to convert, most of the respondents belonged to middle and lower social classes. It shows upper class respondents have been enjoying equal social status with the mainstream of the society, whereas the respondents of lower social class have been experiencing inferiority complex. Hence one may find differences of opinions concerning to conversion.

Table 2

Reasons for conversion

Sl. No.	Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Inequality in Hinduism	80	26.7
2.	To remove caste stigma	45	15.0

3.	To acquire higher status in the society	112	37.3
4.	Attraction towards other religions	63	21.0
	Total	300	100.0

The study revealed that conversion helps for attainment of higher social status in society. Because in most of other religions there is no caste based discrimination resemblance to caste system of Hinduism. Among all the respondents 37.3%(112) respondents have opined that so many people convert to other religions to acquire higher status in the society. 26.7%(80) respondents have said that low caste people and scheduled tribe people convert to other religions due to practice of inequality of Hinduism. In Hinduism the practice of casteism is present even today 21.0%(63) respondents have opined that the people convert to other religions only due to attraction towards other religions other religions like Christianity, Buddhism are based on equality. Remaining 15.0% (45) respondents have indicated that the people embrace to other religions to remove caste stigma in Hinduism.

Thus the people of lower castes and scheduled tribes convert to other religions to enhance their social status, to come out of clutches of Hinduism and to inculcate the principles of other religions. In this way it is clear that conversion is helpful to achieve higher social status.

Further in the present study an attempt is made to understand the opinions of the respondents conversing changes after conversion.

Table 3

Opinion regarding changes after conversion

Sl. No.	Opinions	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Yes	142	47.3
2.	No	34	11.3
3.	I don't know	124	41.3
	Total	300	100.0

The data has clearly indicated that conversion definitely brings about changes in the life of the converted people. But some respondents have not given clear opinion concerning the aspect. Among all the respondents 47.3(142) respondents have opined that no doubt conversion brings about changes. But 11.3%(34) respondents are of the opinion that conversion does not bring any changes in the life of converted people. But remaining 41.3%(124) respondents have no idea regarding conversion and results of conversion.

Thus from the above table it is clear that conversion brings about lot of changes in the life of the converted people. Therefore further an attempt is made to know the changes occurred after conversion.

Table 4

Changes occurred after conversion

Sl. No.	Changes	Frequency	Percentage
1.	High status in the society	39	13.0
2.	Remove caste identity	89	29.7
3.	Bring socio-economic change	14	4.7
4.	No opinion	154	51.3
5.	Others	04	1.3
	Total	300	100.0

The study has shown that from the conversion one cannot be identified with caste. But he is being identified by religion but not caste. At the same time they can get higher social status in the society. Among all the respondents, who have said that conversion brings about changes, 29.7%(89) respondents have opined that conversion removes caste identity 13.0%(39) respondents have opined that conversion provides higher social status in the society. 4.7%(14) respondents have said that conversion brings about social, economic changes among converted people. Remaining 51.3%(154) respondents have not given any definite opinion regarding this aspect.

Thus it is understood that conversion brings about changes in the life of converted people. Further an attempt is made to understand the feelings of respondents if they would convert to other religions.

Table 5

The feelings of respondents if they convert to other religions

Sl. No.	Opinions	Frequency	Percentage
1.	Sense of liberation from caste bindings	60	20.0
2.	A sense of feeling something new in future	71	23.7
3.	One can achieve higher social status in society	19	6.3
4.	Others	08	2.7
5.	No opinion	142	47.3
	Total	300	100.0

As it is already clear that most of the respondents have not interested in conversion to other religions. These respondents have not given any response to the above question. Among other respondents 23.7%(71) respondents have opined that after conversion they feel a sense of something new in future. They look forward in their life.

20.0%(60) respondents have opined that after conversion they feel a sense of liberation from caste bindings and casteism. 6.3%(19) respondents have said that conversion helps one to achieve higher social status in the society. Remaining 2.7%(08) respondents have opined that conversion can bring about changes other than the above. But 47.3%(142) respondents have not given any opinion. They are of the opinion that conversion does not help to achieve higher social status in the society. Only self effort, good employment, proper utilization of government facilities can help depressed class people to achieve higher social status.

Conclusion

Thus the study has revealed that conversion helps for attainment of higher social status in the society. It is because in most of other religions there is no caste based discrimination resemblance to caste system of Hinduism. Therefore, the people of scheduled tribes wish to convert to other religions to enhance their social status to come out of clutches of Hinduism and to inculcate the principles of other religions. In this way it is clear that conversion is helpful to achieve higher social status.

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