



EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION ON SOCIAL COHESION IN TRIBAL REGIONS OF INDIA

R. Trivedi

Department Of Comparative Religion And Philosophy, Demos Foundation Center For Research In Humanities, Shankarrao Kirloskar Marg, Erandwane, Pune.

ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of religious conversions and the impact of external influences in tribal regions of India have played a significant role in shaping separatist sentiments among these communities. Conversions to different faiths often lead to the establishment of new religious identities that can alter the social and cultural dynamics of tribal populations. Moreover, the emergence of these new religious identities can attract external support for insurgent movements, which may leverage the frictions generated by such conversions to galvanize their causes. The interaction of these factors—religious conversions, the creation of distinct identities, and external reinforcement—serves to deepen existing cultural divisions within tribal regions. Simultaneously, the creation of distinct identities plays a crucial role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others within their communities. As tribal people adopt and promote unique cultural markers—such as language, dress, rituals, and customs—these distinctions can promote feelings of exclusivity and difference, further such identity formation is loss from historical roots and new narratives making them powerful forces that can divide. Many impact of missionaries on tribal states of India, includes religious conversion, identity loss, cultural separation, geological separation with different state.

KEYWORDS : religious conversions, identity loss, missionaries, separation, tribals of India.

INTRODUCTION:

Christianity is responsible for separatism in tribal India requires a nuanced understanding of the complex socio-cultural landscape of the region. Christianity's introduction to various tribal groups can be traced back to colonial times when missionaries sought to spread their faith among indigenous populations. While many tribal communities embraced Christianity, seeing it as a means of empowerment or as a refuge from the social injustices imposed by colonial rule and later by dominant cultural force. Christian ideologies undermines their traditional structures and ways of life, fostering a sense of separation from mainstream society and even from their own tribal identities. The Indian National Congress has had significant Christian leadership and has historically advocated for the rights of minority communities. Regional parties in states like Kerala and Goa have also been platforms for Christian leaders to voice concerns regarding local governance and autonomy. Evangelization articulated the tribal people of India through modernisation metaphysical logics (Cortassel, 2012).

1. Religious Conversions And Identity Shifts

Christianity in Tribal Regions through churches forms of "becoming process" of regenerating new religion. In many tribal regions, particularly in Jharkhand, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and the North-East, Christian missionaries have been active since colonial times. They introduced Christianity to Adivasi (tribal) communities, often providing education, healthcare, and social services, which the state was unable to deliver effectively and sets new narrations that tribals are not hindu. While these services were beneficial, the conversion of large segments of the tribal population to Christianity resulted in significant identity shifts. For many tribals, conversion to Christianity marked a cultural break from the dominant Hindu practices of the surrounding regions. This created a sense of separation from the mainstream Hindu social structure and led to the formation of distinct religious communities. In some cases, this new religious identity contributed to political aspirations for greater autonomy, as tribal communities felt the need to protect their newly adopted religious and cultural identity.

The conversion use as a tool for response to social oppression (Audery Kobayashi, 2020). Religious conversion among tribal populations is also seen as a form of resistance to caste-based oppression and exploitation by dominant Hindu groups.

Tribals who felt marginalized within the larger Hindu social order sometimes found empowerment through conversion to Christianity. However, this shift often led to tensions with neighbouring Hindu communities, deepening cultural divides. For example, the Kandhamal riots in Odisha (2008) were partly influenced by religious tensions between the converted Christian tribal population and the Hindu majority. These tensions have contributed to local instability, with political forces accusing Christian converts of fostering separatism (Morelli ; Rohner, 2015).

2. External Influence And Geopolitical Interference:

Christian missionaries working in tribal regions have historically received support from Western organizations, including churches and NGOs. Some Indian political groups, particularly Hindu nationalist organizations, claim that these foreign-supported activities promote separatism by encouraging tribal groups to distance themselves from the Indian state. By bringing in foreign beliefs and values, they often promote a sense of distinctiveness among local population that loss their cultural identity. This can create scenarios where individuals or communities begin to see themselves as separate or different from the broader cultural and historical narratives that have traditionally unified the nation.

The narrative is that foreign missionaries, under the guise of religious conversion, introduce ideas that undermine national unity and foster a sense of distinctiveness and alienation from the broader Indian identity. These claims are often amplified by fears that external forces are using religious conversion to weaken India's internal cohesion (J.Fox, 2002).

The North-East India become a big case study of external influence of separatism in India. The tribal regions of North-East India provide a clear example of how religious conversions, combined with external influences, contribute to separatist movements. The Christian missionaries, during British period, settled in North East India because of climatic influence, later missionaries chosen headman of the tribal groups to convert the whole community into the Christianity (Prasad. A, 2022). The Christian-majority tribal communities of Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya have long felt culturally and politically alienated from the rest of India, due to their distinct ethnic, religious, and linguistic identities.

Insurgent groups like the National Socialist Council of

Nagaland (NSCN), which has demanded independence or greater autonomy, have often found support from external actors, including missionary organizations, and have received ideological, financial, and logistical backing from entities in neighbouring countries like Myanmar and Bangladesh. The NSCN has explicitly linked its demands for Naga sovereignty with its Christian identity, positioning itself as fighting for a Christian tribal homeland separate from the Indian state. The most anti-nationalist activities in the modern era has been motivated either by religion or political influenced. The lack of studies dealing more actively with the combination of separatism and religious violence. (Rapoport, 1984)

External influence also comes from neighbouring countries with vested interests in India's tribal regions. For example, some separatist groups in North-East India have received support from Pakistan, China, and Bangladesh, especially during the cold War era. These countries have provided safe havens, funding, and weapons to insurgent groups, thus intensifying separatist tendencies among tribal populations. Many international agencies are working on tribal rights movements and supporting protection of the rights of Indigenous people in voluntary isolation and initial contact for their land rights movement. North-East part of India is suffered with this from centuries.

Fundamentally, these agencies are promoting international cooperation and partnerships to support efforts to protect isolated indigenous peoples increasing their strengthen mechanisms for their safeguarding across the borders. International legal support for establishing separatism of land along with FPIC (Free, Prior and Informed consent) model (Morelli, M; D Rohner, 2015).

3. Link Between Religious Conversions and Political Separatism:

In many tribal regions, conversions have created new religious fault lines, which in turn have shaped political mobilization. Tribal groups that converted to Christianity have often developed political parties and organizations that advocate for greater regional autonomy or even separation from India. These political movements frame their demands around the need to preserve and protect their distinct religious and cultural identity (L. J. Luzbetak, 1976).

For example, in Nagaland, the rise of Christianity was closely linked with political demands for a Naga homeland, which culminated in armed insurgency. Similarly, in Mizoram, the Christian identity of the Mizo people was central to the insurgency led by the Mizo National Front (MNF) in the 1960s and 1970s, which eventually led to the formation of the separate state of Mizoram in 1986.

The tribal groups of India highly influenced by Christianity since British Era, this pushes for autonomy in rooted with desire for self-determination, desire the self-control over their political, social and economical affairs. Christian missionaries, in some instances, go a step further and advocating for complete separation from India. As a result, these organizations serve not only as political movements but reflects the complex interplay between religion, identity and religious governance.

4. Cultural and Religious Backlash

Tribal groups, whether converted or not, often frame their political struggles as efforts to preserve their cultural and religious heritage. A Christian missionaries established churches and converted individuals, tensions escalated between Adivasi community by separating either Adivasi or hindu. In many cases, religious conversion to Christianity or other faiths is seen as a way to depart from their cultural

identity from the influence of Christianity, which they view as an external imposition. This desire for cultural preservation often overlaps with separatist demands, as tribal communities seek political autonomy to safeguard their way of life (R. Trivedi, 2024).

B. Conflict Between Traditional And New Religions

Religious conversions have sometimes led to internal conflicts within tribal communities, where traditional beliefs clash with newly adopted faiths. The spreading of Christianity is intertwined with colonialism now results into conflicts that are not solely religious but also political and social. For example, in some tribal areas, there is tension between followers of indigenous animist practices and those who have converted to Christianity. Tribes communities find themselves divided not just in religious belief but also separated due to external pressure. These internal divisions can contribute to separatist tendencies, as different factions of the same tribal group may align themselves with opposing political movements.

CONCLUSION

Religious conversions and external influence in tribal regions of India have contributed to separatist sentiments by creating new religious identities, fostering external support for insurgent movements, and deepening cultural divisions. While conversions have often provided tribal communities with education and social services, they have also led to tensions with the mainstream Hindu population, further isolating these communities. The involvement of foreign actors, both religious and geopolitical, has exacerbated these tensions, influence separatist movements in regions like North-East India. The intersection of religion, politics, and external influence continues to be a critical factor in shaping separatist movements among India's tribals.

REFERENCES:

1. Audrey Kobayashi (2020). International encyclopedia of Human Geography, 2nd edition. Pp 151-155. Elsevier 978-0-08-102296-2.
2. Cornassel, J. (2012). "Re-envisioning Resurgence: Indigenous Pathways to Decolonization and Sustainable Self-Determination." *Decolonization, Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1:1, 86-101.
3. Jonathan Fox (2002). In the name of God and Nation: The overlapping influence of separatism and religion on ethnic conflict. *Social Identities*: 8(3):439-455.
4. Louis J. Luzbetak (1976). Unity in Diversity: Ethnotheological Sensitivity in Cross-Cultural Evangelism, *Missiology*, vol. IV, no. 2, April, 1976, pp. 207-15.
5. Morelli, M, and D Rohner 2015. "Resource concentration and civil wars", *Journal of Development Economics* 117: 32-47.
6. Prasad, A 2022. Contested Indigenities: "Adivasi" politics Historically and in Contemporary Times. *Agrarian South: Journal of Political Economy*, 11 (1), 37-61.
7. Rapoport, D.C. (1984) 'Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions', *American Political Science Review*, 78: 658-677.
8. Trivedi, R. (2024). Seeding of Separatism in Tribals or Adivasi of India. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, Vol 5, no 7, pp 4061-4064.