

Faith at Crossroads: Religious Conversion in Odisha

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Declaration

This dissertation entitled "FAITH AT CROSSROADS: RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN ODISHA" submitted by SOUMYA MOHAPATRA to the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Masters of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of any University.

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Certificate

We recommend that the dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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CHAPTER I

Religious Conversion

Introduction

Religion is one of the most powerful, intensely felt, and influential forces in human history. It has shaped people's relationship with each other, influencing family, community, economic and political life. Religion is a significant aspect of social life, and the social dimension is an important part of religion. Scholars agree broadly that no convincing general theory of religion exists and even a definition of the term still eludes consensus. In the modern world, religion, contrary to the conventional understanding of modernization as secularization, continues to play a major role in politics, society and culture. And this role of religion appears, to be increasing rather than decreasing (Turner, 2010: 1). Sociologists have been interested in religion because it is assumed to contain the 'seeds of social life' as such. And as Turner aptly puts it "[r]eligion will not crumble before the flames of rationalist critique or fall apart as a consequence of scientific experiment, because religion is deeply embedded in the actual social structures that make social life possible" (ibid: 20).

Durkheim believed that the existence of religion could be accounted for entirely by the effect of the moral bonds generated by itself, and the need for any society constantly to regenerate such bonds if it were to survive. Marx believed that religion could be explained in terms of human alienation and the mistaken attempt, encouraged by self-interested political elites, to locate the explanation of human inequality and suffering in the cosmic, rather than the social, order (Wallis and Bruce, 1984:11). In the *Protestant Ethic* essays, Weber contends that religious beliefs and practices made an important contribution to the breakdown of economic traditionalism, and the emergence of modern rational capitalism. Several Protestant beliefs and practices came together to form what would become the " Spirit of Capitalism, " a spirit with a particular elective affinity with the capitalist practices of small - scale business people (McKinnon, 2010:42). Weber begins with the observation that the most economically developed areas in turn of the

century Europe tended to be Protestant, rather than Catholic, and that the histories of the Protestant Reformation, particularly in its Calvinist form, and modern capitalism seem to have been intertwined in particularly intense ways (ibid 41).

Only recently have social scientists interested in the study of religious behaviour begun systematically to study those factors that contribute to change in individual levels of religious activity and belief. But these variables are dynamic in nature. Neither activity nor inactivity, belief nor non-belief represents permanent states for most people. Instead, probably the only constant in this whole area is change. For some individuals, the change may be rather dramatic as reflected in religious conversion or apostasy; for others, it may simply be reflected in modest changes in activity and commitment (Albrecht and Cornwall, 1989: 23). Sociologists and social psychologists came to dominate the field in the middle of the twentieth century, particularly after 1960, as interest in new religious movements became a central focus of sociology (Buckser and Glazier, 2003: xii).

A lot of the discussion about the resurgence of religion in modern history has focused on the escalation of fundamentalism. The topic of conversion has been a major theme in the sociology of religion for years. Etymologically, “conversion” comes from the Latin word “convertere” which means “to turn around” or “turn completely”. In a religious context, it means turning away from evil, towards the good, repentance for sin and rebirth to a new life. Different religious traditions might interpret it differently. For Christians this corresponds to a change of heart, for Muslims it is submission to Allah and acceptance of his Prophet, for Buddhists it is “going for refuge” or being enlightened, for Hindus it is self- purification and self-realization (Heredia, 2007: 8).

According to Killbourne and Richardson (1989), the traditional conceptualization of conversion derives from the culture of which it is a part. The typical model of conversion in the traditional paradigm was derived from the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus. This, for many within the Christian tradition and throughout Western civilization, constitutes what conversion should be like, ideally. The Pauline experience and similar passivist conversions are usually described by characteristics such as it being sudden and dramatic; irrational or magical in nature; involving a powerful, external, and impersonal force; usually a single event; the negation of the old self and the affirmation of the new self; change from one static state to another static state; typically occurs during

adolescence and is a "good thing," and behaviour change usually follows belief change. Thus, in the old paradigm the individual is conceptualized as a passive recipient of personality changes and life experiences. Whether psychologically predisposed or situationally tempered, individual conversions are considered determined, in large part, by impersonal and powerful forces acting upon them, within them, or both whereas in the new paradigm conversion is generally explained from the standpoint of active\ agency (i.e., self-directed behaviour), personal choice, meaning, and negotiation (Killbourne and Richardson, 1989: 1).

Since all men and all human groups have a world view, or a perspective that helps them makes sense of the world, there is also a general tendency among them to consider this point of view as absolute. Clyde Kluckhohn remarked that no matter how primitive or crude it may be, there is a "philosophy behind the way of life of every individual and of every relatively homogeneous group at any given point in their histories. When a person gives up one such perspective or ordered view of the world for another we refer to this process as conversion" (Lofland and Stark, 1965: 862). There is little consensus on how to define conversion, except that it involves the notion of change. The sociologist Heirich, for example, writes about conversion as "a change of the heart" inscribed in "a process of changing a sense of root reality" as well as "a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding" (1977:674). Yet how much change is involved, and from whose point of view it is assessed remain at issue; Rambo (1993), for example, adopts a subjectivist perspective whereby "conversion is seen as what a group or individual believes it to be." Moreover, the author sees conversion as a "multiple, interactive and cumulative" process, rather than a single, dramatic act of rupture (Rambo 1993:7).

It has been argued by anthropologists and sociologists that religion involves more than just ideas about the supernatural; it constitutes a theory of the world, a way of constructing reality that seems uniquely real to those who experience it. Buckser and Glazier (2003) question that if this is true, then how can it be that individuals suddenly choose new religions? To change one's religion is to change one's world, to willingly at one's own accord change the fundamental presuppositions upon which both self and others are understood. The fact that this is possible and almost routine in certain religious traditions raises difficult questions about the relationship of individuals to their cultural

surroundings. What can prompt such an abrupt and total transformation? How is it achieved, and what are its effects? (Bucker and Glazier, 2003: xi)

Religious conversion then entails dealing with at least three interlocking and interdependent dominant symbols: God, world and human beings; and their various inter-relationships are reconstituted in a manner that is optimally acceptable to the converts themselves (Robinson and Clarke 2003:4). Thus while religious conversion may start with an enthralling vision of God in some contexts, it may also spring from a more attractive notion of the world or human beings in other situations.

Conversion also raises important questions about the social processes within which religion is rooted. Conversion which is usually perceived of as an individual process, involving a change of worldview and affiliation by a single person, occurs within a social context. Religious groups arrange the ways in which believers may move in and out, and in many cases the converts are placed in a unique social position. These processes articulate with other dynamics within groups - their internal divisions, their authority structures, their political rivalries, etc. In many cases, religious groups are also held accountable to the restrictions and requirements of state authorities. All these raise various issues of how do these social structures integrate the intense and often unpredictable experience of the individual convert? What effects does conversion produce in the group that gains a convert, and what does it do to the group that loses one? Conversion highlights the interaction, and in many cases the tension, between individual consciousness and the structural requirements of community life (Buckser and Glazier, 2003: xi-xii).

In many places religious indifference loosely unites a large part of the population; in many others, religious indifference sharply divides people. Jonathan Swift once perceptively remarked: 'We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.' Nowhere is this truer than in India today, and no issue illustrates this better than that of conversion (Heredia, 2007: ix). Heredia observes that conversion is a complex, multi-faceted and emotionally charged issue. Fundamentalists make the most of it, liberals confuse it, many do not comprehend what the argument is all about, and many more just do not want to get involved. However, especially in a multi-cultural, pluri-religious society like ours, it is a problem that cannot just be brushed aside.

In today's surcharged context of minority bashing and anti-conversion laws, of majoritarian politics and minority vote-banks, the issues implied get more dangerous every day (ibid xiii).

Since the religious life of people is interlinked with other aspects of personal and group living, religious conversion can never be completely cut off from any of these. Depending on one's perspective and location, negative or positive aspects can be stressed. There are numerous strands of thought that must be recognised to piece together a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of this complex problem. Though there are possibilities for contentious misunderstanding, religious conversion can open to deeper and enlightening reciprocal understanding, for, in the process of change, conversion "critique the status quo, question traditional ways of living, challenge dated structures" (Heredia, 2007: 2).

Thus, religious conversion can, as Heredia says, "destabilize the life of a people, unsettle painfully balanced boundaries, and scramble carefully constructed boundaries. If the affected people have imagined an exclusive nationhood for themselves, then nationalists will readily see conversions as subversive". Religious conversion never happens in a vacuum, it is always mediated: by other persons, social institutions, group and community interactions. Thus every religious tradition has a community of believers that live in greater or lesser harmony among themselves, and any entry or exit affects the communities concerned in multiple ways, leading to changes on both sides. The multiple dimensions of conversion need to be sorted out, even though they are not separate and in many cases they overlap (ibid: 2).

In situations where the boundaries between the communities are sharply divided and antagonistic, conversion can signify the ultimate treachery. Heredia notes that "even when inter-group or inter-community relationships are not in conflict, conversion movements have the potential to challenge accepted wisdom and renegotiate the status quo. In times of rapid social change, religious conversion is likely to find aggressive promoters and equally fierce resisters, even though the voices of the converts themselves are silenced" (Heredia, 2007: 3). In such a surcharged climate, religious identities become powerful mobilizers in the game of electoral politics, even though appeals to religion and caste are forbidden by law. Today, implicitly if not explicitly, the politics of identity

based on religion and caste has displaced the politics of interest premised on class and party. The resulting politics of passion is rapidly becoming a politics of hate, nurtured on a sense of self-righteous grievance and irrational insecurity (Heredia, 2007: 5).

So in order to make sense of the process of conversion it is important that its definition should not be contained within a narrow definition. It should be broad enough to capture the various differences across time, denominations and region. Conversion includes an array of situations and meanings where 'conversion' requiring proper initiation, total adherence to a particular set of beliefs with a rupture from the past is only one possibility (Robinson and Clarke, 2003: 13)

Conversion in India has emerged from both internal and external processes. In popular understanding there is a distinction between the 'outside' religions which seek to convert as opposed to the 'inside' religions which do not. But according to Robinson and Clarke (2003), such an understanding is simplistic and has little historical validity or analytical usefulness. There have been numerous instances of 'internal' conversions such as those from Shaivism to Vaishnavism, one Bhakti sect to another etc. With regards to Christianity, not only did it come to India at different points of time and from different parts of the world, but also impacted the Indian society through various ways. For example, Christianity in Goa came through conquest, in Kerala through political alliances with local leaders, and Christianity brought by missionaries to parts of British India through colonial authorities, even though reluctantly (Robinson, 2003:31). Moreover, the approach of missionaries to the Indian society was different. The early Catholic missionaries of the sixteenth century came with the ideas of hierarchy which was influenced by the 'estate' order of their own society and their more tolerant to the idea of caste than the latter missionaries of the nineteenth century who came from Europe in which the ideas of 'equality' and 'individuality' prevailed. They viewed the caste system with much more disdain and repulsion. With their authority structures which were male dominated, the different churches sometimes clashed with the more equitable tribal customs (ibid: 32).

In case of the *adivasis* who were defined as 'primitive tribes' or 'animists' during the colonial times, were considered as being ripe for conversion. It was argued that their 'primitive' beliefs would be replaced by more 'advanced' forms of religious belief such

as that of Hinduism or Christianity. This idea became so pervasive that many Indian nationalists came to believe that it was necessary for the ‘tribals’ to come under the Hindu fold. Consequently a campaign for conversion made its headway (Hardiman 2003: 255). Lately, there has been a substantial increase in the politicization of conversion under the Hindu Right movement which has changed the dynamics of debate and resulted in the drafting of anti-conversion laws in a number of states. This leads us into certain questions such as can the *adivasis* be considered as Hindus? How does their conversion, either to Hinduism or Christianity, change their equation with their neighbours? Does it necessarily lead to a better quality of life or is it just a nominal change? How far is the state right in making laws about who and under what circumstances can a person convert?

Taking into account all these questions about conversion and its accompanying questions of change, identity, dignity, boundaries and conflict, I would like to proceed with my dissertation which will focus on the conversion of *adivasis* to Hinduism as well as Christianity as they are considered ‘ideal’ for conversion. Religious conversion in India has never been a uniform process and has varied according to time and region. Therefore conversions have to be historically mapped and examined in terms syncretism as well as resistance and rebellion. An attempt will be made to scrutinize how the lifestyles and worldview of the *adivasis* have been affected due to laws, missionaries and the *Hindutva* forces.

Objectives

- Historically contextualize religious conversions
- Examine problems of assimilation and alienation
- Scrutinize factors that lead to heightened socio-religious tension
- Analyse how religion and power tend to coalesce, be it colonialism and missionary efforts at evangelisation or India’s Hindu nationalists’ quest for a certain kind of nation.
- Examine laws and legislations on religious conversions and their applicability

Methodology

This will primarily be a descriptive study based on secondary sources such as government records, books based on independent research, monographs and articles on the subject and specific case studies.

Organization of the Chapters

Chapter one of the dissertation deals with the different ways in which religious conversion has been conceptualised and approached. It tries to examine the intricate ways in which religion and society are linked. Then it goes on to describe the idea of the *sacred*. For this purpose, the ideas of Durkheim and Otto have been used. Since the notion of sacred is a manifestation of power which can be experienced, attention has been given to religious experience. Further, the chapter looks at the relationship between religion and social groups and how the conditions of living invariably shapes and affects the religious outlook of a community. It then discusses religious conversion as a shift in the basic premises in which one's own self and others are understood. Finally, it examines religious conversion from the perspective of the individual, i.e. individual as an autonomous seeker and then conversion as a community venture.

Chapter two focuses on issues and debates regarding conversion in India. It tries to describe the growth and development of Christianity in India at various points of time and its subsequent effect on the Indian society. It also examines missionary efforts at 'civilizing' the people of India as well as the dialogue that took place between Hinduism and Christianity. Then it looks at the question of conversion with regards to the *adivasis*: the ways in which the notion of 'tribe' was conceptualised, how these notions were used in formulating laws that marginalised them further and increased their vulnerability and finally how these colonial ideas were carried on even after the Independence of India and continue to inform our thinking. The last section of this chapter deals with the rise of Hindutva which centres around the idea of a single Hindu culture and national identity and also the invention and reinvention rituals *shuddhi* and *gharwapasi* for furthering its own interests.

Chapter three of the dissertation deals with religious conversions in Odisha with a special focus on the Kandhamal issue. It describes the early history of Odisha and the ways in which the tribals were initially Hinduised. Then it describes the transformation that took place during the colonial period. It examines the growth of Christianity in Odisha and the strategies adopted by the Christian missionaries to evangelize the people of Odisha. It also scrutinizes the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act (OFRA) which was enacted in 1967 in order to curb religious conversions, especially the work of Christian missionaries. Then it looks at how the Hindu Right wing groups found Odisha a fertile ground for their activities constructing the Odia, Hindu and Indian identities as one and the same. Finally it analyses the Kandhamal issue by examining the historical circumstances which include the relationship between the Kandhas and the Panas, how the dynamics of these relationship changed owing to the activities of the missionaries as well as the Hindu Right wing forces, and the conditions that finally culminated into the bloody clashes between the aforementioned groups.

CHAPTER II

Religious Conversion: Conceptualization and Approaches

Throughout history, the different religious traditions lived in relative isolation from one another, especially in the West. But the present scenario has changed. In the present milieu, issues related to conversion have generated considerable controversy. On one hand while some wonder if these are ‘true’ conversions and if they are valid religious choices; on the other hand, others simply observe that as modern societies become more plural religiously, it is inevitable that one will see more and more of these conversions to other religious traditions. Sociologists and social psychologists came to dominate this field of study in the middle of the twentieth century, particularly after 1960, as interest in new religious movements became a central focus of sociology. Before delving into the concept of religious conversion, it is necessary to understand the concept of religion and its relation with the society.

Religion and Society

Religion, which is basically concerned with shared beliefs and practices, is one of the most important institutional structures of the social system. The central interest of religion appears to concern something comparatively vague and intangible, whose empirical reality is far from clear. It is concerned with a ‘beyond’, something that transcends the ordinary experiences of everyday life.

A comparison of religion with other human activities, or of religious institutions with other social institutions, might suggest that religion with its reference to an intangible ‘beyond’ is something unimportant and transient, something marginal to the genuine concerns of human life. Yet this is not the case. Religious institutions have a special importance, to be concerned with an aspect of human situation that, precisely in the transcendence of the commonplace, involves something of pre-eminent significance for people.

On one hand religion has been characterised as embodying the most sublime of human aspirations; as being a bulwark of morality, a source of public order and inner individual peace; as ennobling and civilizing in its effects upon mankind. On the other hand, it has also been accused of being a stubborn impediment holding back progress, promoting fanaticism, ignorance, superstition, etc. The fact that religion represents a set of human activities and a complex of social forms of considerable significance cannot be denied. This leads to an important question about what is the most effective approach for the observation and analysis of this multi-faceted and ambiguous aspect of man's social existence.

Religious Experience and notion of the *Sacred*

Durkheim saw religion presupposing a classification of all the contents of human experience into two absolutely opposed categories, the sacred and the profane. The profane belongs to the sphere of routine experience. Religion is an attitude toward the sacred that has no end or purpose extrinsic to itself. The attitude elicited by the symbols which represent the sacred is one of intense respect.

Durkheim describes seven additional characteristics of the sacred as something experienced by and affecting human beings. First of all, the sacred as an aspect of what is experienced involves recognition of or a belief in power or force. It is not to symbols or to other objects that religious cult is primarily addressed but to a power spread through such things. Powers, or forces, are at the core of the religious attitude. Second, the sacred is characterized by ambiguity; it is a matter of ambiguous power or powers. There are two facets to this ambiguity. Sacred things and forces are ambiguous in that they are both physical and moral, human and cosmic or natural, positive and negative, propitious and unpropitious, attractive and repugnant, helpful and dangerous to men (Durkheim as cited by O'Dea, 1966: 20).

The next three related qualities of the sacred discussed by Durkheim are to be seen in the fact that the sacred is non-utilitarian, non-empirical and does not involve knowledge. Utility and everydayness are unfamiliar and alien to the sacred and work is a prominent

form of profane activity. Durkheim stated that the sacred quality is not fundamental to objects but is bestowed on them by religious thought and feeling. The sacred is not an aspect of empirical nature but rather imposed upon it. Moreover, it is an aspect which does not in a useful manner aid our acting upon natural forces and things. The sacred is not a matter of knowledge based on the experience of the senses (ibid: 20).

A sixth characteristic of the sacred described by Durkheim is its supportive and strength giving character. Sacred forces act upon believers and worshippers to strengthen and sustain them. The religious attitude exalts the believer and raises him above himself. A seventh characteristic of the sacred is that it makes some demands on the believer and worshiper. It imposes upon the human consciousness a moral obligation, an ethical imperative. The sacred, then, in terms of Durkheim's analysis is radically other than the profane; is non-utilitarian and non-empirical; does not involve knowledge but involves power; is ambiguous with respect to nature, culture, and human welfare; is strength-giving and sustaining; elicits intense respect and makes an ethical demand upon the believer (ibid: 21).

Rudolf Otto, in his book *The Idea of the Holy*, analyzed the sacred or holy in terms which he considered more fundamental than those to be found in the German Protestant theology of his day. He felt that rationalism had affected religious thinking by reducing the idea of the holy to those characteristics of God which could be conceptualized and articulated in intellectual terms. Moreover, he pointed out the tendency of religion in the West to confuse the original idea of the holy with ethical conceptions and to see the holy as somehow synonymous with the 'completely good' or the 'absolute good' (Otto, 1936: 5). The holy or 'numinous' to use the term Otto has coined, is something beyond rational and ethical conceptions. The holy is a 'pre-eminently' living force. It involves, for Otto, an irreducible category of experience, a given element of data, a specific feeling-response. What is involved is a mystery and above all creatures, something 'hidden' and 'esoteric' which we can experience in feelings. The holy is the '*mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*.' It involves something "whose kind and character are incommensurable with our own" which evokes "a peculiar dread," but is at the same time attractive and inviting to the beholder (Otto as cited in O'Dea, 1966: 21).

The coincidence of many strategic elements in the analyses of Durkheim's and Otto's treatment of the sacred or holy is worthy of attention. These elements are the extraordinary character of the phenomenon, its implication of power, its ambiguity in relation to man, its awesome character and the feeling of dependence that it gives rise to. It should also be noted that what Durkheim refers to as "the implication of obligation" is closely related to what Otto describes as "the sense of unworthiness" (ibid: 22).

So the sacred points towards a power which though manifests itself in experience, lies beyond it, and the religious experience is an experience of this power. The religious experience is a reaction to things or events experienced as sacred that is, as a revelation of power eliciting a specific kind of response which combines both intense respect and strong attraction.

The classic works on religious experience were all written from a psychological point of view. Whether the phenomenon was considered "normal" or "abnormal", to the degree that an effort was made to explain the occurrence of religious experiences, primary attention was paid to various aspects of the human psyche. Stark (1965) notes that if we adopt a cross-cultural view of human affairs, it will become clear that there have been a number of instances when human beings have thought themselves confronted with supernatural agencies occurred in social situations where, far from being unusual, such experiences were considered normal. And in many such situations the failure to manifest religious experience would be deemed 'abnormal'. Thus certain social situations are structured to produce religious experiences among participants. The primary causes for such normative behaviour are understood to be located in 'the social environment, not to be an additive outcome of unrelated individually motivated actions' (Stark, 1965: 17). An apt example can be cited from Fernandez's (1982) study of the Bwiti, a syncretic religion derived from a variety of autochthonous and Christian traditions and adhered to by the Fang people of Africa. The members of Bwiti claim that their imaginative elaborations of liturgy and belief come to them in dream communications with the ancestors or under the influence of the psycho-reactive substance *eboga*, a drug to which they are deeply attached (Fernandez, 1982: 4). According to Fernandez, initiation into Bwiti commences with a vision-quest in search of messages and signs from the ancestors through the ingestion of *eboga*. It seems clear from Fernandez's detailed presentation of Bwiti that its success and efficacy for members lies in their participation in such rituals and from the

actual feelings of 'tranquil-heartedness' which they experience. Often it was observed that the *eboga* was taken only as a result of the insistence of relatives or friends. As a *Banzie* reports:

I was a Christian but I found no truth in it. Christianity is the religion of the whites. It is the whites who have brought us the Cross and the Book. All the things in their religion one hears by the ears. But we Fang do not learn that way. We learn by the eyes, and *eboga* is the religion that enables us to see! (p. 481)

Conversion to Bwiti therefore takes place through confirming experience. Ideas and images assume a more prominent role in the process of 'amazement' and 'edification through puzzlement' induced by the ritual performances of Bwiti (ibid: 512). The aim of such rituals is to stir up the religious imagination of members and to enable them to surpass themselves.

Religion and Social Groups

Founders of religions as well as their followers and converts come from various social groups. The circumstances under which they live, their surroundings and lifestyles differ and as a result so do their requirements, attitudes, responses and motivations. Consequently some religious ideas will have a greater appeal for certain social groups and to a lesser degree for others as different groups have different religious needs. As people develop their relationship to the 'beyond' in response to their everyday social relations, and as these mundane affairs vary so will their religious sensitivities.

According to Weber, the lower middle classes, especially the urban artisans and small traders who have a lesser connection with nature as opposed to the farmer will show affinity towards a rational economic foundation. As a result their attitude towards life will be calculative and purposive manipulation. In such a case honesty was a profitable way of behaving in these groups as they believed that meeting their responsibility would give just rewards. On the other hand, peasants whose work is invariably tied to the vagaries of nature are not closely integrated into the rational market economies in the traditional society. So they tend to depend upon magic to influence and manipulate the forces of nature. In this case the idea of just compensation does not easily evolve. Weber states that the peasantry as a class won't become an active carrier of a religion unless it is threatened

by enslavement or dispossession (Weber, 1966: 80). He also observes that wealthy commercial classes are never the chief carriers of an ethical or salvation religion. The more privileged position of a class, the lesser is its likelihood of developing an 'other-worldly' religion but instead the assign to religion the primary function of legitimizing their own 'life pattern and situation in the world'. Weber also notes that in case of a warrior who is under constant threat of death and has to face unpredictable elements, is more bent towards the idea of honour and needs from religion protection against magic and prayers for victory (Weber as cited in O'dea, 1966: 57-59)

Religious Conversion

From the above discussion it becomes clear that conversion or the acceptance of a new religion is closely related to the needs, outlook and aspirations which are very likely to be affected by the social circumstances which the people find themselves in. According to O'dea various groups in their conversion are affected by their cultural prestige which the new religion or ideology carries in their eyes. The reasons for this could be the origin of the ideology, the impressiveness of the content or its connection with other entities that are highly regarded. He also observes that in conversion of peoples to new doctrines which are products of more complex cultures than their own, the newly accepted ideas often undergo considerable changes (O'Dea, 1966: 65)

To change one's religion is to change the world as one knows it, to voluntarily shift the basic presuppositions upon which both self and others are understood. The fact that this is possible that it is, indeed, almost regular in certain religious traditions raises difficult questions about the relationship of individuals to their cultural surroundings. What are the circumstances that result in such an abrupt and total transformation? How is it achieved, and what are its effects?

Conversion also raises important questions about the social processes within which religion is embedded. Conversion is usually an individual process, involving a change of worldview and affiliation by a single person, but it occurs within a context of institutional procedures and social relationships. Religious groups structure the ways in which adherents may move in and out, and in many cases they place converts in a unique social

position. These processes articulate with other dynamics within groups - their internal divisions, their authority structures, their political rivalries, and more. In many cases, religious groups are also held accountable to the restrictions and requirements of state authorities. So how do these social structures integrate the intense and often unpredictable experience of the individual convert? How does temporal power constrain the sense of divine power so integral to many conversions? What effects produced when a group gains a convert while another group loses one? Conversion highlights the interaction, and in many cases the tension, between individual consciousness and the structural requirements of community life (Buckser and Glazier, 2003: xi-xii). Is there a way to find out what constitutes a genuine conversion and what does not? Can conversion be a group experience or decision? Whole villages 'converted' to neo-Buddhism in Maharashtra, India, in the 1950s. Or, is conversion an intensely dramatic and personal event? This came to be the classic image of conversion in *Christianity*. These diverse meanings and understandings of conversion pose difficulties for the theorists of conversion (Lamb and Bryant, 1999: 7).

In a classic study at the beginning of the twentieth century William James, the American philosopher and psychologist, described conversion in the following terms:

to be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. (James n.d. 197).

He considers conversion is in its essence as a “normal adolescent phenomenon, incidental to the passage from the child’s small universe to the wider intellectual and spiritual life of maturity”. The symptoms are the same, a sense of incompleteness and imperfection; brooding, depression, morbid introspection, and sense of sin; anxiety about the hereafter; distress over doubts, and the like. And the result is the same—a happy relief and objectivity, as the confidence in self gets greater through the adjustment of the faculties to the wider outlook (ibid: 197).

Such persons are, to use James's other phrase for converted souls, the 'twice-born'. While James's study remains important, it was limited in at least two important respects. It

limited the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity and it interpreted conversion wholly in psychological terms.

Rambo opines that humans are ‘fragile beings’ and dealing with the realities of everyday life elicits various kinds of emotions such as fear, hopes, doubts, and dreams. Religious conversion is one of humanity's ways of dealing with these dilemmas, of solving or resolving the mystery of human origins, meaning, and destiny. Through conversion an individual may gain some sense of ultimate worth, and may participate in a community of faith that connects him or her to both a rich past and an ordered and exciting present which generates a vision of the future that mobilizes energy and inspires confidence. Joining a group and subscribing to a philosophy may offer nurture, guidance, a focus for loyalty, and a framework for action. Involvement in mythic, ritual, and symbolic systems gives life order and meaning. Sharing those systems with like-minded people makes it possible to connect with other human beings on deeper intellectual and emotional levels (Rambo, 1993: 2).

Defining and Measuring Religious Conversion

Lewis R. Rambo, notes that “the definition of conversion remains a vexing problem” for academic studies. In part, this is because the issues of defining and measuring conversion are thoroughly intertwined. Within the wide disciplinary range of European and North American scholars studying the theme, there has been a general consensus that conversion involves a process of radical personal change in beliefs, values, and, to some degree, personal identity and worldview. However, questions about how to measure these changes (self identification, degree of commitment, beliefs and convictions, demonstration events, and discourse or rhetorical indicators), which level of analysis to utilize (individual, societal, cultural, network location, or market analysis), and the role of personal agency versus external contextual factors remain matters of significant dispute and debate (Rambo, 1993: 6).

Critically analyzing conversion narratives in light of each convert’s location within a conversion career provides important insights for interpreting both the reasons for and the effects of conversion. These narratives are a convert’s own discourse, a discourse that is

informed and created within a particular religious and social context. It should thus come as no surprise that there is certain degree of conformity among the set of practical crises converts describe as characterizing their pre-conversion life. Thus, as researchers it is important to approach conversion narratives as both an empirical indicator of conversion and a socially constructed account that is influenced by certain 'religious institution/discourse/ ritual context in which the individual is interviewed'. Conversion narratives serve as both a resource for the convert and a window for the researcher into how the convert makes sense of the world (Steiganga and Cleary, 2007: 23).

Conversion, according to Parrucci (1968:145) is "a reorientation of the personality system involving a change in the constellation of religious beliefs and/or practices." The extent of personality re-orientation involved is determined by two factors: the degree of commitment to the new socio-religious ideology produced in the proselyte, and the degree of similarity between pre and post conversion identity. The magnitude of personality change affected by religious conversion is also determined by the level of similarity between pre- existent and post-conversion self-definition. Parrucci (1968) differentiates conversions that require a major transformation in basic religious identity (e.g., Catholic to Buddhist) and those that involve changes in emphasis but not major identity restructuring (e.g., Presbyterian to Methodist). These are termed "inter-faith" and "intra-faith" conversion respectively.

The following part of this chapter will first deal with what Parrucci calls intra-faith conversion and will examine conversion from the viewpoint of the individual. The next part will deal with inter faith conversion with emphasis on conversion to Christianity. It will focus on instances where whole communities have converted and study the nature of this kind of conversion.

1. The Autonomous Seeker: Conversion from the perspective of the individual

Recent analyses of the conversion process have profited from the use of models of multi-causality; that is, conversion is explained in terms of the right combination (in terms of time and space) of a number of necessary elements. Some of these elements lie, within

the potential convert and include conditions such as tension or deprivation. Other elements are situational contingencies, involving the interaction of the proselyte with a religious missionary (Lofland and Stark: 1965).

Lofland and Stark (1965) in their study of a small millenarian religious cult have outlined a model of the conversion process. They have operationalized the term conversion by taking the convert's own declaration of "regeneration". To account for the process of conversion, they examine two sets of factors. The first they call *predisposing conditions* which consist of attributes of persons before to their contact with the cult. Second, there are situational contingencies that lead to recruitment of people predisposed to the cult called *divine precepts*.

According to them, in order for conversion to occur a person must 1.Experience enduring, acutely felt tensions 2.Within a religious problem solving perspective, 3.Which leads him to define himself as a religious seeker ; 4.Encountering the cult at a turning point of life, 5.Wherein an affective bond is formed (or pre-exists) with one or more converts; 6.Where extra cult attachments are absent or neutralized; 7. And where, if the convert is to become a deployable agent, he is exposed to intensive interaction. The first three factors are classified as "predisposing." They hypothetically exist prior to contact with the group and function to make the individual vulnerable to conversion after contact is established. The remaining four factors are regarded as "situational" contingencies. They hypothetically lead to recruitment to one group and to the adoption of the group's world view. In the absence of these situational factors, total conversion does not occur, no matter how predisposed or susceptible the prospective convert may be. Accordingly, the conversion process is conceptualized as a value-added process in which the addition of each new condition increases the probability that conversion will occur (Lofland and Stark 1965:874-875).

For Lofland and Stark the aforementioned tension is "best characterized as a felt discrepancy between some imaginary, ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up" (Lofland and Stark,1965: 864). They found that the pre converts generally *experienced* tensions more acutely and over longer periods than most people do. And even though tensions can be resolved by different

means, all pre converts were by and large unaware about conventional psychiatric and political perspectives for defining and solving their problems and had an inclination to *impose religious meanings to events* (ibid).

According to Snow and Philips (1980), Lofland and Stark's traditional approach is itself empirically questionable and theoretically speculative as it does not take into account the fact that motives for behaviour are generally emergent and interactional. It also assumes that the explanations given by converts for their conversion were necessarily those that motivated or precipitated it in the first place. They question such an assumption because conversion involves the reconstruction of one's past, frequently including the discovery of personal needs and problems not previously discernible or troublesome enough to warrant remedial action. Hence, the old past and the new past bear slight resemblance to each other.

Snow and Phillips also question the necessity of two of the situational factors that are components of the Lofland-Stark model: that of the turning point and that of weak or severed extra-cult attachments. Their original conceptualization of the connection between the turning point and conversion is problematic because the identification of something as a 'turning point' is largely a function of the interpretive schema in use, the turning point really cannot be known a priori or without familiarity with the world view in question. Therefore, instead of conceptualizing the turning point as something that accelerates conversion, it is better thought of as a consequence that can function to symbolize conversion itself (Snow and Phillips, 1980: 443).

In summary, Snow and Phillips not only questions the generalizability of some key elements of the Lofland-Stark model, they also raise questions about related models of conversion that place considerable emphasis on pre-structured tensions and cognitive states, and on prior socialization. The analysis also suggests that instead of being the same in all groups, the conversion process may vary, depending, for example, on whether the group in question is communal or non communal, and "respectable" or "idiosyncratic." For them, the interactive process holds the key to understanding conversion (Snow Phillips, 1980: 444.)

Heirich (1977) finds the following shortcomings with Lofland and Stark's theorization of conversion. He says that the explanations given by them, whether taken singly or together, remain unsatisfying as a theoretical statement about what is occurring. It is too general an account and is supposed to apply equally well to all forms of changed behaviour, which may not always be the case as to why a certain perspective is more alluring to potential converts. Yet the explanations are not general enough, in that they do not exhaust the range of circumstances under which one might expect conversion to occur. Moreover, they largely ignore the nature of the phenomenon itself.

Heirich (1977) tests some social science arguments about the nature of religious conversion. He compares Catholic Pentecostals who claim to have received the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and to have reoriented their lives around this encounter with the Divine with a control sample from similar backgrounds. He asks five essential questions: (1) To what extent are converts subject to the kinds of influence which social scientists have said account for religious conversion? (2) Is the presence of such influence coincidence? (3) How important an influence on conversion are these social factors, singly or together? (4) Under what circumstances do social influences have the most impact on susceptibility to reorienting religious experiences? (5) Are there more interesting questions to ask about this kind of phenomenon?

In most of the social science literature dealing with religious conversion, three rather different explanatory themes emerge. The first views conversion as a fantasy solution to stress, in which the threatening situation is dealt with either by making an alliance with supernatural forces that could change the power balance or by changing one's frame of reference so that previously distressing material no longer seems important. Much of the psychological literature on religion adopts this perspective (Heirich, 1977: 656)

A second explanatory theme explains religious conversion less in terms of the circumstances which produce the immediate result (e.g., stress) than in previous conditioning. Thus it looks for socialization circumstances that should leave one ripe for the plucking. It looks at parental orientations (especially as they affect eldest children, who are seen as more likely to identify with parental values), at sex-role education (since women tend to participate in religious activities more than men), and at the impact of schooling (ibid: 656).

A third and more recent explanatory theme in the social science literature focuses upon interactions that make a different understanding of one's experience possible. This kind of argument focuses upon circumstances that lead one to take a particular frame of reference seriously. Generally, it involves the analysis of patterns of interpersonal influence and what is sometimes called the process of *encapsulation*, whereby inputs from others become so mutually consistent and reinforcing that one begins to see things through the others' eyes. These circumstances become so imposing that clarity about *root reality* is destroyed and an alternative sense of grounding takes its place (Heirich, 1977: 673-674).

Conversion becomes especially interesting because it involves a conscious shift in one's sense of grounding. Whatever the result, it involves an examination of core senses of reality, identification of aspects which must be suitably responded to with the whole being and which presumably will affect action choices for the convert thereafter. Participants in many normal, ongoing activities take the ultimate sense of reality underlying their actions largely for granted. They may participate in activities for a variety of reasons and with a wide range of commitment to the underlying basis for that activity. New converts, in contrast, usually have made a major examination of the claims or encounters which underlie the symbols and activities involved (ibid: 674).

So, Heirich views that the actors' self-reported accounts of religious conversion cannot be taken as objective and unproblematic reports on experience. It follows that actors' talk about conversion ceases to be an objective resource for the sociologist and becomes, instead, an interesting topic in its own right. To study conversion is then to study the variety of conditions under which it makes sense to talk about being converted.

So Heirich examines the Witnesses' conversion accounts as expressions of practical reasoning about the problem for them of discovering appropriate ways to describe what supposedly happened in the course of their conversion. He observes that 'appropriateness' is something which is sought by the Jehovah's Witnesses in accounting for their behaviour in terms of tacitly understood rules, blueprints. This shows that Witnesses internalize specific views of their organization and that these views are rationally used by them as resources when constructing their personal and collective experiences of religious conversion. Their narratives are not only in agreement with the official version of the

organization but it is also used as a resource when deciding how to voice their personal experiences. That is, it provides a set of guidelines for judging the appropriateness of particular ways of formulating and expressing the meaning of events and states of mind.

One of the assumptions on which his analysis is founded is that speech is not simply an objective report upon reality. It is the speakers' way of using available resources to construct an appropriate view of reality. Speakers' decisions about the appropriateness of different resources are made partly by reference to their sense of the kind of context in which they are speaking. And one of the considerations to be taken into account in making such decisions is the set of rules which are considered to govern speech and action in particular contexts. To be a competent member is partly to have learned to make skilful use of the rules which render certain kinds of actions appropriate in certain kinds of situations (Heirich: 1977).

Accounts of conversion are constructions of experiences which draw upon resources available at the time of construction to them sense. They are not fixed, once-and-for-all descriptions of phenomena as they occurred in the past. Rather, their meaning emerges in the very process of construction, and this takes place at different times indifferent contexts

Led by a number of important papers by Roger Straus, sociologists began to argue against both social structural and social interactional forms of determinism. Conversion is not something that is done to the hapless individual; it is something the knowing choosing individual accomplishes. Instead of being a passive (and possibly unaware) carrier of social forces, what Harold Garfinkel called a 'cultural dope', the convert was seen as an active seeker after enlightenment (Bruce, 2006: 5).

Straus (1979) says sociologists have conventionally approached religious conversion as something that happens to a person who is destabilized by external or internal forces and then brought to commit the self to a conversionist group by social interactive pressures. This stands as an alternative paradigm to the individual seeker striving and strategizing to achieve meaningful change in his or her life experience. He observes that most sociological literature focuses on *antecedent variables* such as absolute or relative

deprivation, social class, mobility or marginality. Other researchers have analyzed conversion process as akin to becoming *deviant* or to recruitment into social movements like Lofland (1965) study of the divine precept group where he focuses on personal problems which sets up the person as a seeker for conversion or social processes by which the seeker adopts the new reference group and its world. He critiques Heirich (1977) for placing precedence upon ideas rather than action.

For Straus (1979), the fundamental unit of social life is the concrete human *interactant*, and the atomic unit of social organisation is the social act. It is important to take into account the actual behaviour of social actors and their phenomenological experience of action. He says that though a passivist approach has helped to understand the interrelationships between social conditions and conversion, it is equally important to delve into how seekers generate and/or utilize their groups in their search for transformation. In adopting such an assumption changes our conceptualization of what is problematic. For example why a person seeks to converts assumes secondary importance to the question of how does a person manage to maintain across time any form of strict social, behavioural or phenomenological organisation. So from a new perspective he seeks to treat the collective as a product of what participants in that collectivity are doing; how the person comes to be a seeker and then how the seeker goes about finding a more adequate world of everyday life particularly where it leads to massive transformations of identity, belief, experience and conduct.

So it becomes fascinating to examine how people strategize to maintain their own realities, and to attract others to their own proprietary worlds and realities. This activist paradigm attempts to investigate how human beings construct and reconstruct their social and phenomenological realities and how conversion is at once a personal and collective accomplishment on the part of situated, social actors. In the course of exploring the question how seekers seek, Straus (1979) says that a pattern emerges. At first, the seeker combs through social networks, chance encounters, mass media and any other available sources of information. Even the identification of oneself as a seeker emerged only through the course of seeking. The seeker generally tests out, learns how to operate within the subculture rather than blindly embracing everything. Thus, he finds conversion is not a terminal act. Rather the convert works to make conversion behaviourally and experientially real to self and others, to immerse self in the world of fellow converts and

master the specific practices institutionalized by the group for the maintenance and expansion of “results” (the new identity, conduct, forms of subjective experience and grounds of meanings ascribed to conversion). Straus lays emphasis on investigating the relationships between forms of social organization and both maintenance and recruitment; and also examine how material communicated to the seeker as concepts comes to be experienced as actuality.

Richardson (1980) argues that the distinction of conversion as either abrupt or gradual is too simplistic which assumes that the process of conversion is a single passive event which happens to a person and lasts a lifetime. In contrast to this, he says, another view is needed which incorporates an understanding that 1. The processes involved in conversion are complex and varied; 2. There are many different kinds of conversion; 3. Many people nowadays experience more than one conversion; and 4. Such people are often aggressive, positive “seekers,” quite in control of their personal searching. He also uses Travisano’s idea of *alternation* contrasting it with conversion, as two different types of ‘identity change’. According to Travisano alternation is

To establish a new identity, a new announcement must be recurrently made and validated. But one does not take on only an abstract property called an identity; one takes on new definitions of situations and new situated behaviour. This may be relatively easy or difficult. This relative ease or difficulty depends on how far afield one goes; that is, on whether old relationships are unchanged, transformed, or destroyed. And it is on the interaction contingencies which make for relative ease or difficulty that our distinction between conversion and alternation rests. Complete disruption signals alternation (Travisano as quoted by Richardson, 1980:47).

Further, he says “Alternations are transitions to identities which are prescribed or at least permitted within the person’s established universe of discourse. Conversions are transitions to identities which are proscribed within the person’s established universes of discourse, and which exists in universes of discourse that negate these formerly established ones. The ideal typical conversion can be thought of as the embracing of a negative identity. The person becomes something that is specifically prohibited” (ibid: 47). Gordon presented the concept of *consolidation*, a two stage process of assuming an identity which combines apparently contradictory elements. This type of conversion contrasts with conversion as Travisano defined it, and with *consolidation* (which is Gordon’s term for Travisano’s *alternation*), and is potentially more active in orientation. He says

By (consolidation), I refer to the adoption of an identity which combines two prior but contradictory identities. Consolidation involves two stages: first, the partial adoption of an identity which rests on a change from one universe of discourse to another (that is, partial conversion), and second, the adoption of an identity which rests on both these universes of discourse. The first stage of this transformation is fraught with guilt and emotional upset which, unlike complete conversion, persists long after the conversion is made. The second stage involves a release this guilt and upset (Gordon as quoted by Richardson, 1980: 48).

Richardson says this statement is important because it brings to our attention that the contradictory identities are welded together and not just cancelled out.

Balch (1980) in his study of a millennial UFO cult tries to look at the apparent dramatic changes that follow conversion as a result of quick learning of roles rather than changes in personality, values, beliefs or attitudes. Balch observes that acting like a believer corresponds to conforming to the set of expectations specified by the cult members and most of the followers were self defined spiritual seeker who were actively exploring new ideas and seeking out new experiences that would accelerate their spiritual growth. In their daily life, the new members generally went through the motions and using the right vocabulary which concealed the fact that they were actually very confused and full acceptance came only after intense involvement in the cult's day to day activities. Though the members *looked* tuned in, *appeared* committed but were simply playing a role that concealed their real feelings, even from members of the cult.

In contrast to this staged appearance, the private reality of life in the cult usually remained hidden beneath a facade of religious fanaticism and behaviour was not always consistent with values and attitudes. The first step in conversion to cults was learning to *act* like one by outwardly conforming to a narrowly prescribed set of role expectations. Genuine conviction developed later beneath a disguise of total commitment and it fluctuated widely during the course of a member's career.

Snow and Machalek (1984) have suggested that an analysis of how the converts talk and reason can provide a productive insight into the study of conversion. They propose that conversion should be viewed as a change in one's "universe of discourse," and that certain "rhetorical indicators" in the talk of individuals should identify the convert. Based

primarily on Snow's (1976) study of the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement, they suggest that converts may be identified by: 1) the adoption of a master attribution scheme; 2) biographical reconstruction; 3) the suspension of analogical reasoning; and 4) the embracement of a master role (Snow & Machalek, 1983: 266-78). As a first attempt to introduce a focus on language to the study of conversion, Snow and Machalek's formulation deserves serious theoretical and empirical attention.

Snow and Machalek's (1983) approach to the study of conversion grows out of a constructive critique of much of the contemporary work in the area. They argue (1983: 159) that while researchers have explored the "causes and consequences" of conversion, there has yet to be an extensive analysis of the nature of conversion itself. In fact, while researchers have proceeded to generate theories of the process of conversion (e.g., Heirich, 1977; aLofland & Stark, 1965), the characteristics of the converts themselves are usually either ignored or assumed. They suggest that "this is a serious oversight; especially since an understanding of the conversion process presupposes the ability to identify the convert" (1983: 260). With these concerns in mind, Snow and Machalek (1983) proceed to develop a definition of the "convert as a social type," based on an analysis of the talk and reasoning of subjects and supported by their own underlying theory of conversion.

As Snow and Machalek (1983) observe, despite considerable difference of opinion over the nature of conversion, there is one underlying assumption upon which most researchers would seem to agree, and that is that "conversion involves a radical change in a person's experience" (1983: 264). Whether fast or slow, complete or partial, radical change in something is assumed to underlie the experience of conversion. What Snow and Machalek argue is that it is one's "universe of discourse" which undergoes radical change in the conversion experience (1983: 264). This approach postulates a theoretical connection between universe of discourse and consciousness that is based on language. It is thus a thoroughly cognitive approach to the study of conversion, having its origins within the complementary assumptions of symbolic interactionism and the sociology of knowledge.

In short, consciousness we have is the result of communication (i.e., symbolic interaction) within a universe of discourse that is shared. Since language is the primary "carrier" of

meaning, it is necessary to access to the elusive entity of consciousness via language. It follows that if conversion involves a change in one's universe of discourse then it also involves a change in consciousness, and the evidence of both changes should be found in the language (i.e., talk and reasoning) of the convert. Or, as Snow and Machalek put it "Inasmuch as language is practical consciousness; it stands to reason that transformations of consciousness necessitate transformations of language" (1983: 279). The question remains, however, as to exactly what sort of rhetoric and reasoning should be considered as a characteristic feature of the convert.

Snow and Machalek propose four "rhetorical indicators" or "formal properties" of the convert. Of the four rhetorical indicators of conversion proposed by Snow and Machalek biographical reconstruction is the one with the most potential, both theoretically and empirically. Biographical reconstruction refers to the idea that individuals who undergo the radical change of conversion reconstruct or reinterpret their past lives from the perspective of the present. In a very real sense, the past is created anew. This does not necessarily entail a wholesale fabrication or "distortion" of one's previous life, but rather a restructuring in which previously important events may be de-emphasized and less significant ones elevated to greater prominence (1983: 266-78).

Staples and Mauss (1987) argue that for Snow and Machalek biographical reconstruction which is involved in conversion is also present in everyday, non-conversion experience, but they suggest that in conversion, biographical reconstruction is greatly amplified and intensified. But if biographical reconstruction in conversion is only quantitatively (not qualitatively) different from "normal" identity reconstruction, then operationally it would be difficult to measure how much reconstruction is beyond "normal". Snow and Machalek (1983) provide no general procedure for making such a decision, nor do they indicate exactly what procedures they employed in deciding to assert that biographical reconstruction was quantitatively great enough in the converts they observed to warrant the "convert" identity (Staples and Mauss, 1987: 136).

Staples and Mauss also critique Snow and Machalek's theory saying that offers a rather weak conceptualization of the person who experiences conversion. In their scheme, the person is replaced with the term "consciousness," and this concept is never well developed. In contrast, they see conversion as involving primarily a change in self-

consciousness, or, using the more conventional term, as a change in the “self-concept”. Thus, conversion is seen to involve a change in the way a person thinks and feels about his or her self. One advantage of this approach is that it allows a more plausible theoretical link between the individual and the universe of discourse via language than is possible with the concept of “consciousness” (Staples and Mauss, 1987: 137).

To distinguish the self-concept change involved in conversion from other, more routine, changes in the self-concept (e.g., role changes, life-cycle changes), they use the term ‘self-transformation’ - the creation of a new vision of who a person really believes who he is when all his social roles and self-presentations are stripped away. Secondly, they also think that a focus on the language and rhetoric of converts is a useful direction to pursue, not so much because it allows us indirect access to consciousness, but rather because it is through language that individuals transform themselves. Thus, Snow and Machalek view particular kinds of language and rhetoric as observable indicators of some underlying change in consciousness. Staples and Mauss view particular kinds of language and rhetoric as methods used by subjects to achieve self-transformation.

Though these two uses of language are not mutually exclusive or incompatible, they do lead to somewhat different research questions. The central question motivating our research is: how do subjects use language and rhetoric to achieve self-transformation. For Snow and Machalek, the subject's self-conception as a convert or a non-convert is largely irrelevant to determining whether or not the subject is a convert. Instead, they propose that the only basis necessary for the identification of the convert is the presence or absence of their four proposed rhetorical indicators of conversion. In effect, from Snow and Machalek's point of view, the researcher or analyst is better qualified to determine who is or is not a convert than are the subjects themselves. But for Staples and Mauss conversion is an inherently subjective phenomenon, and only the subject is qualified to tell us who he or she really is. Rhetorical devices can be theoretically useful only if it can be shown how subjects use them as methods in their efforts to achieve self-transformation. Or, alternatively, it may be possible to show how these rhetorical devices are used to achieve some other feature of religious life, such as religious commitment (ibid: 137)

Staples and Mauss' primary difficulty with the Snow and Machalek formulation is that it does not seem to recognize sufficiently the essentially subjective nature of conversion. Where Snow and Machalek focus on "universe of discourse" and "consciousness," they focus on the self-concept; where Snow and Machalek use rhetorical indicators to identify the convert, we rely on the person's self-professed status as a convert. Where Snow and Machalek view particular kinds of language and rhetoric to be a reflection of some underlying changes in consciousness, they view particular kinds of language and rhetoric as tools individuals use to achieve a transformation of the self. Finally, where Snow and Machalek tend to view conversion as something that "happens to" a person, they view the person as an active participant in the creation of a new "real self." Our own efforts have constituted an attempt to capitalize on the benefits of each approach. They propose that conversion be viewed as a process; that this process is fundamentally one of self-transformation; that self-transformation is achieved primarily through language; and that the convert plays an active role in his or her own self-transformation (Staples and Mauss, 1987: 146).

According to Rambo (1993) conversion is a process of religious change that takes place in a dynamic force field of people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and orientations. In his book 'Understanding Religious Conversion' he says that (a) conversion is a process over time, not a single event; (b) conversion is contextual and thereby influences and is influenced by a matrix of relationships, expectations, and situations; and (c) factors in the conversion process are multiple, interactive, and cumulative. There is no one cause of conversion, no one process, and no one simple consequence of that process. In addition to the proliferation of contradictory definitions, there is the problem of *who* defines genuine conversion.

Often the convert sees the conversion as sincere and profound, whereas the advocate or the missionary (the agent of the new religious option) sees it as less than adequate. Such a problem is a classic issue in missions. Western missionaries seek to find the "pure" convert, while the converts themselves assimilate the faith in the categories relevant to them, not to the dictates of the advocate (Rambo, 1993:5). The best way to deal with the problem of definition is to perceive that distinctions are usually based on ideal types, and that few people or situations are as pure or simple as these definitions imply. Establishing pure types of conversion may be useful conceptually and academically, but we must

question how useful these categories are in the actual world of what people *experience* as conversion. Rigidity of conceptualization can only hinder the quality of research in this area of scholarship (Rambo, 1999: 5-6).

Whether it entails converting from one religious tradition to another, changing from one group to another within a tradition or the intensifying of religious beliefs and practices, instances of conversion can be found in many cultures, historical periods, economic conditions and social categories. Although 'conversion', as a theological word, is used most often within the Christian tradition, it has come to refer to the general notion of religious change. Because definitions of conversion abound, the phenomenon of conversion continues to be an elusive concept. Rambo and Farhadian propose that 'converting' is the most appropriate term to signify that religious change is an ongoing complex process involving many different dimensions, and provide a heuristic stage model which can serve as a framework in which the nature of the converting processes can be seen more adequately (Rambo and Farhadian: 1999). They give a seven stage model involving the following:

1. Context or the total environment of religious change. The context influences each stage and each stage in turn has an impact on the context. The context consists of three interconnected areas: the macro-context, the micro-context and the meso-context. The macro-context consists of large-scale domains such as political systems, religious organizations, multinational corporations, relevant ecological considerations and economic systems. The micro-context focuses upon the more private world of the individual, such as family and friends, occupation, etc. Lastly, the meso-context includes those aspects which mediate between the macro contexts and micro contexts, such as local government, regional politics and economics, and local religious institutions. This contextual background provides an array of resources and opportunities as well as different powers of access, support, control and repression. Taking into view the different kinds of contexts that shape a person's and group's life, studying the process of conversion should be systematic and it should take into account the contours of the context so that patterns, themes and issues can be made explicit.

2. Crises are events that disrupt experiences and question a person's or group's taken-for-granted world. Crises can be generated by the interaction of external as well as internal forces. Much of the social science literature has highlighted events such as social disintegration, political oppression, or something very dramatic which leads to crises. Important features of the crisis stage to be considered are the intensity (degree of severity), duration\length of time), scope (degree of pervasiveness), and source (internal/external) of the crisis.
3. Quest: The quest stage includes the various ways in which people act in response to crises and/or the way in which people adjust themselves to life, especially their religious life. Three important factors are involved in the quest stage: response style, structural availability, and motivational patterns. Response style depicts how a person's responds to conversion, i.e., is it active or passive. An important factor in understanding the quest stage is how one judges the motivational structures. What motivated the individual to convert? Generally, human motivations are complex, involving emotional, intellectual and religious features. It is assumed that at the quest stage people try to maximize meaning and purpose in life. Under abnormal or crisis situations this active searching becomes more persuasive; people look for resources in order to 'fill the void' and/or enrich life. Other motivations that may stimulate an individual or group to seek religious change include the desire to experience pleasure and avoid pain, enhance self-esteem, establish and maintain relationships, obtain power, or experience transcendence. The quest stage often entails a combination of these motives.
4. Encounter: The encounter stage describes the contact between the potential convert and the advocate/proselytizer. It is important to take into account that this initial contact can accelerate the converting process, triggering a crisis, and encouraging a quest for new solutions. Three major components of the encounter are the advocates, the potential converts, and the setting of the encounter. The second feature to be considered in understanding the encounter stage is the potential convert and what he or she perceives as the benefits of conversion. The type and degree of benefits will vary according to individual need and are usually mixed. Conversion may provide a system of meaning, emotional gratification, and techniques for living, leadership, and power. For instance, a powerful benefit is

that the religious option may provide a sense of belonging and a compelling sense of meaning.

5. Interaction: If an individual continues with the religious group after the encounter, the interaction intensifies. Here the converting person or group learns more about the teachings, lifestyle and expectations of the group, and is required to begin making a decision for commitment. Four features of interacting immerse the converting person or group into the new religious option: *ritual*, *relationships*, *rhetoric*, and *roles*. First, the growth of personal relationships provides networks of transformation. These relationships, which are fundamental to the course of learning, may follow the lines of family, friends or teachers. Usually, the closer the relationship between the advocate and potential convert the greater is the likelihood for religious change. Secondly, deep-level learning of the religious tradition is made possible by getting involved in ritual practices which enable converting persons to experience religion beyond the intellectual level and infuse a sense of belonging. Third, the converting person or group starts to make use of the specific language and expressions of the religious group, thereby incorporating into their life ways the language of transformation intrinsic to the particular group. Finally, converting persons learn the expected roles and conduct required before the deity/God and others.
6. Commitment: At this stage the potential convert is required to make a choice and, in many cases, some kind of public demonstration of the status change takes place that often gives rise to feelings of relief and liberation. A common method for publicly displaying commitment is the personal testimony, a narrative of the convert's life before and after conversion. This declaration serves to restructure the biographical information, integrating the convert's and religious community's story.
7. Consequences: In order to assess the converting process in a sophisticated manner, the nature and extent of conversion depends in part on how many aspects of the convert's life are affected and how comprehensive these changes are. Many scholars believe that authentic conversion is an ongoing process of transformation.

The initial change, while crucial, is a first step in a long trajectory of transformation.

The process of converting evinces enormous diversity in the contemporary world. This model provides a cartography of the converting process.

Thus we see that most of the social scientific studies of conversion before the 1970s were framed in a modernization perspective whereby religious phenomena appeared as pre-modern, "irrational" and ultimately, doomed to disappear (Beaucage, Meintel, Mossière, 2007 :11). In this light, "psychopathological" (Stark 1965) causes were invoked to explain conversion. Given religion's functional links with social structure, along with the radical changes to the latter caused by colonialism, it was expected that primitive cosmologies would be replaced by a modern, rational world view. This was expected to happen after an intermediary phase where natives, though formally converted to the forms of Christianity brought by the colonizers, would retain and reinterpret important segments of their previous religious systems. Since the 1970s, religious renewal in industrialized societies, as well as in former colonies in Africa, Asia and Latin America has resulted in many cases of conversion to new religions or reconversion. The latter typically involves much-intensified religious belonging and practice for individuals whose belonging was previously a nominal affiliation. As a result, a new body of literature on conversion is emerging. The new literature shows the influence of postmodernist perspectives; for example, in the focus on individual trajectories and the subjective transformation the act of conversion may entail (ibid: 12). On the one hand, conversion is a social issue and often a political one.

2. A Collective Endeavour: Conversion from perspective of the community

At the centre of the discussion of religious change in Africa is the 'intellectualist theory' of Robin Horton. Horton (1971) argues that the expansion of social boundaries brought about by economic and political changes led to a quite a lot of changes in the religious systems of African people. In what he calls a "basic African cosmology", Horton assumes that the supreme being is, for the most part, concerned with non-localised happenings

affecting a large number of people, while lesser spirits govern the spiritual affairs of the villages and are the chief supports of a local moral order. As people move from this local sphere to broader spheres of social interaction, their ritual and spiritual concerns move from a microcosmic focus on lesser spirits to a macrocosmic focus on a supreme being. A dramatic shift towards the macrocosm usually results in conversion to one of the world religions, Islam or Christianity, but it may provoke a transfer in the traditional faith from a microcosmic to a macrocosmic focus and a greater emphasis on a supreme being. Thus, Horton ultimately returns to older theories of comparative religion which claim that monolatry is the most appropriate form of religious expression in a universalistic or modern society (Horton, 1971: 101-3).

But the actual story of Islam and Christianity in Africa is one of highly conditional and selective acceptance. Indeed, it is marked by many additions and omissions, permutations and combinations. It would appear, then, that the beliefs and practices of the so-called world religions are only accepted where they happen to coincide with responses of the traditional cosmology to other, non-missionary, factors of the modern situation. Where such beliefs and practices have no counterpart in these responses, they tend to be weakly developed or absent from the life of 'converts'. Again, where responses of the traditional cosmology to other factors of the modern situation have no counterparts in the beliefs and practices of the world religions, they tend to appear as embarrassing additions to the life of 'converts'. Such a conclusion reduces Islam and Christianity 'to the role of catalysts- i.e. stimulators and accelerators of changes...' (Horton 1971: 104)

Later, Horton proposed another kind of hypothesis (1971, and 1975). He emphasized that there are religious implications to changes in social conditions which make an originally isolated people extend their social relations beyond the limitations of their old social boundaries. Such people are required to equip themselves with a wider worldview by means of which they can explain, predict, and control the social order in the new social situation. This intellectual change provides a condition for the acceptance of world religion (Huang 1996: 436).

In a similar vein, Fernandez (1982) gives an account of the society and culture of the Fang, a Bantu people of Western equatorial Africa, and in particular on their religious creation called Bwiti, deploying Christian and indigenous images in a creative synthesis that is entirely rooted in Fang social and historical experience. One of its areas of

occurrence is the northern and north-western part of Gabon, even though it was never adhered to by more than 8 or 10 per cent of the Fang population (ibid: 356). Fernandez's central premise is that the Bwiti religion seeks to restore the order in Fang life by creating a new and tangible universe to take the place of the one disrupted by European contact, both direct and indirect, over the past two centuries. The world of Bwiti serves as an escape from the strife that increased in Fang life during the periods of migration and subjection to colonial government.

The members of Bwiti claim that their imaginative elaborations of liturgy and belief come to them in dream communications with the ancestors or under the influence of eboga, a drug to which they are deeply attached (Fernandez, 1982: 4). The author then moves on to a discussion of Bwiti supernaturals, including Christ, who appears under the name of Eyen Zame ('He Who Sees God'), and the Virgin Mary, who carries the name Nyinywan Mebege. But Fernandez cautions that Bwiti cannot be considered Christocentric and that the crucifixion is viewed by Bwiti as a curse rather than the central redeeming event it is made out to be in Christianity (ibid: 406). What Bwiti is the suggestion of coherence in a world which otherwise presents itself as highly fragmented, but this achievement is bought at a price, as its adepts are spurned by the modern elite for not really contributing to the building of the new Gabon Republic (ibid: 566). Thus it enabling us to see how and why people try to reconstruct a world as an integral whole out of the remains of their past, the cultural ambiguities of their present, and the bits of their perception of Christian and other alien traditions and also its ability to describe a symbolic complex in a state of flux reacting to an environment in flux. So the role of Bwiti as a religion to predicate some more concrete and manageable identity upon them, which is able to reconcile opposing categories, such as men and women, young and old, the living and the dead (ibid: 544).

Huang in his study of a Taiwanese village contends that conversion to Christianity is not only about using different words, objects, and rituals to achieve certain purposes but it is also a kind of political statement, both in terms of relations with the colonizers and, more importantly, with fellow people. Of great importance here are the different views of society utilised by the Ami (the people of the village Iwan in Taiwan) and the academics who study them. The latter presume society to be compartmentalized into areas like

religion and politics, and go on to describe entry into a different religion as being a purely religious phenomenon somehow divorced from politics or economics.

In contrast to this peculiarly Western treatment of conversion he presents a very local picture of entry into Christianity which, in local terms, has little to do with an isolate called religion and can be better described within the larger arena of politics, economics, and kinship, which for the people of Iwan are not separate, isolated categories, but are rather all means of achieving the goals of life - good health, prestige, and material comfort. For the Ami there is no distinction between politics and religion and, consequently, for them conversion is as much a political event as it is a religious one. Although the Ami of Iwan appear to have converted to Christianity they actually maintain a belief system that is very similar to descriptions of pre-Christian notions. In Iwan conversion to Christianity did not bring about a drastic change of belief, or a new cosmology, rather new words, objects, and practices have been fitted onto a much older way of doing things. The changes in the village that accompanied the adoption of Christianity were the result of political machinations and not of religious enlightenment (Huang, 1996:437).

Throughout the paper Huang has stressed the interconnectedness of what is called "religion" and "politics" in Ami discourses and shows that many Western writers on conversion have failed to recognize that other people do not compartmentalize society in the ways Westerners do. When dealing with religion Western writers often seem reluctant to discuss it as a practical or a profit-based phenomenon. Centuries of associating Christianity with spirituality and things ethereal have lead writers to discuss anything religious in these kinds of terms, while the material side of life has continuously been associated with Satan and evil. Western writers have tried to describe conversion in purely religious terms because they partake of these associations - that religion must be about belief and enlightenment while politics and material gain are the concerns of the devil. Huang has tried in this paper to show that, for the Ami of Iwan, at least, conversion is not about a radical and somehow instantaneous change of belief rather it is a strategy employed by people to improve the conditions of their everyday lives (ibid:438)

Robert Baum (1990) in his article examines the growth of Christianity in a single south shore Diola group, the Esulalu, and its interaction with Diola awasena religion. He

contends that the history of Diola Christianity has been dominated by conflict between a new religious practice and belief and the persistent claims of awasena religion. The study of religious change among the 12,000 Diola-Esulalu suggests that traditional religion is not swept away with the arrival of a new religion. Conversion is not the only direction of religious change. Reconversion to awasena religion remains a common occurrence. Diola religion has not withered away; it has remained an independent and dynamic faith. Furthermore, it has helped to shape the world view of an emerging Diola Christianity (Baum, 1990: 370).

He uses the term 'conversion' to indicate an individual's decision to accept a new source of religious authority. Conversion is seen as the beginning of a long process of integration into a new religious tradition rather than the sudden and dramatic change represented by the conversion of Paul in the Christian tradition. Moreover, this conversion process need not involve the renunciation of one's former religious system. It must be remembered that African traditional religions are not narrowly exclusive; various African religious systems have traditions of incorporating foreign ritual forms and ideas. Even for the most ardent adherent there will remain areas in which pre-conversion ideas remain important. At that point the individual Christian attempts to come to terms with the conflicting demands of two systems of ideas. He describes the ways in which Diola Christians have made their new religion respond to this conflict and resolve the issues that led them to convert and turn to Christianity to meet spiritual needs that are deeply rooted in Diola culture (ibid: 371).

While questioning the contention that the erosion of the microcosm will cause a shift towards monolatry, he accepts Horton's claim that the pressures of the colonial era seriously challenged traditional religions. The establishment of European domination challenged the efficiency of Diola institutions in all areas of life. The imposition of colonial government, its policies of taxation, forced labour and military recruitment all raised profound questions about the bases of power in the community. The origins of French power remained mystifying and were not eagerly understood through Diola historical experience. The decline of the political and economic order and the people's diminishing capacity to describe new circumstances encouraged a sense that new ritual powers were needed. Some people sought out European religious practices as new forms of prediction and control and in order to understand the spiritual base of the dominant

community. Others turned inward and re-examined their own religious concepts in order to restore their ability to give meaning to their changing world (Baum 1990: 373-4).

Baum is primarily concerned with those who turned outward and embraced Christianity. Their responses to Christianity must be explained both at a collective level, in which one can trace changes in normative attitudes, and an individual one, in which new religious beliefs and practices are absorbed or rejected. An examination of Esulalu community reactions to Christian evangelisation reveals a pattern of changing responses. During each stage of contact between Diola religion and Christianity, a portion of the community has welcomed the additional sacred and worldly knowledge of the missionaries, so long as by doing so they did not compromise central features of awasena religion. When the missionaries have insisted upon the renunciation of traditional practices, the community has withdrawn its co-operation and a majority of adherents have returned to the practice of awasena religion. Those who have remained in the Christian camp have had to resolve the conflicting claims of an older religious system and a newly embraced Christianity.

Initially, in many cases, Diola converts were drawn to European Christianity because of the hegemonic position that Europeans enjoyed in colonial Senegal. Some converts saw Christianity as a path to the attainment of economic advantages or social prestige. Still others sought missionary protection against the colonial administration. The desire for literacy was also a major motivation for attending catechism schools, which were the only available schools in the region. In these cases adherence to Christianity might only represent a decision to ally with an alternative religious system. It need not indicate that the individual had rejected traditional beliefs (Baum, 1990: 374).

The new convert moves into a world where two conflicting modes of explanation compete within his consciousness, a Christian mode and one deriving from his traditional religion. The convert attempts to resolve these conflicts in a permanent way. Five broad patterns of resolution can be identified. First, there is the sudden and far-reaching conversion in which one embraces a new faith fully. In this case old ways appear to have given way in a radical shift of one's life orientation. This is exceedingly rare and is difficult to analyse. In the second pattern, there is a decisive shift of religious authority, but one in which the paradigms of Christian thought are only partially incorporated. The continuing tension between old and new ideas is resolved by the convert's acceptance of

the authority of the missionaries to interpret religious texts and doctrines for the newcomers to the faith. This pattern would be particularly common in oral cultures where the skills of textual analysis would be perceived of as external to the community and where missionaries would be slow to translate religious texts into African languages. In such cases, the convert embraces the new religion and its leadership all the more firmly and critically rejects or emotionally negates the continuing claims of traditional ideas. In such a mission Christian stance, the convert continues to rely heavily on external interpretations of proper conduct and doctrine rather than interpreting his new religion from his own knowledge and experience (ibid: 375).

In the third method, that of indigenisation, the convert puts his efforts at resolving the tension between religious systems by bringing to his new religion the spiritual and moral questions of the old. This involves the expansion and application of Christian beliefs to traditional concerns. For Diola Christians this entails explaining Diola moral and spiritual concerns by drawing on Christian beliefs and practices. In the fourth pattern, a syncretic mode, the new Christian maintains a dual allegiance by recognising two sources of religious authority. He develops a sense of each faith having its own areas of knowledge and expertise as well as its own areas of ignorance or error. Finally, there is the alternative of reconversion, a return to the traditional faith and a rejection of Christianity. In this mode the tension between two systems of thought becomes too intense and the convert resolves the conflict by abandoning the newer tradition and embracing his former religion. Baum notes that the fifth mode has been the most frequently used and has been a means for the introduction of Christian ideas into Diola religion (ibid: 376).

According to Baum, in approaching the study of conversion, one must begin with the assumption that two religious traditions come into contact, each implying a world view far more comprehensive than any particular statement of belief can fully articulate. In most cases a person's decision to adopt a new religion does not imply a complete break with the religious ideas of the past. In converting, new adherents accept a new source of religious authority but do not initially understand the full implications of the new teachings. New concepts are often understood through the categories of experience sustained by their prior religious knowledge. Only gradually can these deeper structures of thought be influenced by new religious experience. This persistence of pre-conversion modes of enquiry and explanation encourages the convert, where permitted, to establish

links between the teachings and attitudes of his pre-conversion life and the demands of the new religion (Baum, 1990: 394).

Concluding Remarks:

The prototype of the new paradigm are seekers, or individuals who actively make plans, choices, and decisions, and generate many of their life experiences (Straus: 1976). Rather than pushed around by powerful, unseen, and uncontrollable forces, the seeker is an active agent. The seeker is generally characterized by the following; volition, autonomy, search for meaning and purpose, multiple conversions or conversion careers, rational interpretation of experiences, gradual and continuous conversion(s), negotiation between the individual and the potential membership group, and belief change that follows behaviour change, as the individual earns the role of being a new convert (Kilbourne and Ricardson, 1989: 2)

Thus, religious conversion is not an occurrence which takes place independent of human experience. The process of religious conversion as well as the attribution of its cause(s) cannot be understood apart from actor and audience perspectives. Converts need the social standards of some reference group against which to measure themselves before their privately made or publicly proclaimed self-attributions of having converted acquire credibility to either themselves or to others (ibid: 15). Conversion can be meaningfully understood then, only within a social context.

Active conceptions of conversion emphasize volition, choice, and subjectivity, whether or not they support or challenge the status quo. They are, however, more likely endorsed by groups who want to change the status quo in contemporary society. Active explanations are frequently used to question traditional values, beliefs, lifestyles, and existing institutional arrangements.

So from the aforementioned discussion on conversion, we see cases where whole communities have converted while on the other hand, viewed from the individual level, conversion is highly variable and even reversible, as several of the studies show. Finally, it is important to note that the very concept of conversion, understood in the narrow sense

of complete break from past affiliations, followed by unambiguous devotion to new ones, is open to question. The trajectory of the process of conversion is complex and multifaceted and it would be a mistake to try to conceptualize in one particular way only. The cases mentioned above show how people have appropriated traditional religious practices into their vision of Christianity and also vice versa as in the case of 'Bwiti'. As Sharpe notes, in whichever part Christianity has been in the process of gaining a firm footing, there have been encounters, recognitions conflicts, tensions, compromises, victories and surrender (Sharpe, 1977: ix).

Conversion experiences, as a sub category of religious experience, are often recognized as crucial to religious conversion since they motivate the dual processes of self-transformation and commitment to a religious group or faith (Snow and Machalek 1984). As Lofland and Skonovd (1981) very correctly observe, the conversion experience itself is partly molded by expectations of what conversion is about or "is like," that that there is therefore the probability of a relatively "good fit" between the "real" experiences and paradigmatic accounts. Because it is probable that they reflect "raw reality" (the first level of social reality), it is our intention here, in part, to delineate the variety of conversion accounts (the second level of social reality). The efforts of analysts may be thought of, indeed, as a third level of social reality - one that tries to keep pace, often unsuccessfully, with the ever-changing character of the first two levels (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981:375). Therefore in order to examine the actual nature of conversion we have to study people who have experienced it and then only can we analyse and draw conclusions from it. Thus the kinds of religious conversions can be varied. It can be intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, coercive or a mix of two or more of the types mentioned (Lofland and Skonovd, 1981: 375).

CHAPTER III

Religious Conversion in India: Issues and Debates

This chapter deals with the issue religious conversion which has become the subject of passionate debate in India. It will basically focus on tribal conversion to Christianity and the rise of Hindu right wing groups. It will try to trace the evolution of Christianity and the issue of conversion in the context of colonialism in India and the subsequent growth of the Hindutva ideology and the various ways in which different groups of people have become stake holders in this process.

From the early 20th century onwards, religious conversion has surfaced time and again in the political realm, in the media and in the courts. During the last few decades the matter has been highlighted in the plethora of newspapers, journals, and books whose pages have been devoted to the question of conversion. Apparently, a large group of Indians regard it as an issue of crucial import for the future of the country. The positions in the argument are clear. On the one hand, there are those who appeal for a ban on conversion, because it upsets the social peace in plural India. This group consists mainly of Hindus. The aversion towards the proselytising drive of Christianity and Islam is widespread among various Hindu groups - from the radical spokesmen of the Sangh Parivar to the moderate Gandhians. On the other hand, there are those who argue that conversion is a fundamental human right, which should be protected in any democracy. Generally, the proponents of the right to conversion are Christians and secularists. In spite of the clarity of these two positions, which have remained unchanged throughout the previous century, the debate has not seen significant progress. The dialogues are still governed by feelings of mutual incomprehension, awkwardness, and resentment. The participants in the debate seem to agree on one thing only: the gap between the different views on conversion is unbridgeable.

The Indian Constitution addressed the issue of conversion more than half a century ago. In Article 25, it is stated that "all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess, practise and propagate religion". Soon, it would turn out that this piece of legislation was not able to resolve the problems around conversion in

Indian society. In 1954, the Madhya Pradesh state government initiated an investigation into the proselytising activities of foreign missionaries, which resulted in a report that recommended legal restrictions on conversion. In the next decade, the Orissa government endorsed a Freedom of Religion Act that put such recommendations in to practice. Other states followed. Recently, the Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Forcible Conversion of Religion Ordinance added to the confusion. The subsequent polemics demonstrated that the question if conversion is still as contentious as it was before (Claerhout and Roover, 2005: 3048).

Eaton (1997) raises the question of why, in modern-day cross-cultural encounters where Europeans directly administered non-European colonies, some communities in colonies converted to Christianity and others did not. He says that this seemingly straightforward question raises some thorny methodological and theoretical issues. What, for example, is conversion? What is religion?

One may readily admit that societies continuously construct, reconstruct, and reconstitute themselves both socially and culturally, and that as a result no religion can be said to possess a fixed and unchanging essence. For the student of religious conversion movements, this proposition suggests that we can no longer conceptualize the phenomenon of conversion, as early generations did, in terms of the "spread" of an essentialized tradition from point A to point B - typically, from metropolis to periphery-as though it were a substance, like molasses or lava, flowing outward from some central point, engulfing and incorporating all that it passes over while itself remaining unchanged. Rather, we should adopt the perspective of the society actually undergoing change and see conversion not as passive acceptance of a monolithic, outside essence, but as "creative adaptation" of the unfamiliar to what is already familiar, a process in which the former may change to suit the latter. This formulation in effect inverts the modern Western lay understanding of religious conversion, informed by generations of institutionalized Protestant effort, which tends to look at the process from the standpoint of the agent? i.e., the "missionary" who goes out and "converts" the "native" to his or her religion? rather than from that of the society undergoing change. All of this raises the interesting question of who, in the meeting of two cultures, is actually changing whom. And what, in the end, is actually changing? (Eaton, 1997: 243)

So the questions that Eaton is raising here are very fascinating as he shifts the focus of the study on conversion from the perspective of the 'agent' to that of the 'native'. This helps us to understand the process of conversion not as passive reception of ideas and symbols with a sharp break from the past but the different permutations and combinations that it

presents, which becomes an enthralling matter of study. The focus shifts from the proselytizers to the host population. . "There is now a very general agreement," wrote Horton in 1993, "that the phenomenon of 'conversion' can only be understood if we put the initial emphasis, not on the incoming religious messages, but rather on the indigenous religious frameworks and on the challenges they face from massive flows of novel experience." Religious conversion in India presents its own peculiarities as different groups react differently to this process. Since the focal point of this paper is conversion to Christianity it is important to trace its growth and development in the context of India.

Christianity in India

Christianity came to India first with traders and much later with the colonial conquerors from the west. The Syrian Christians in South India trace their origins to St Thomas. The tradition of St Thomas's visit to the south goes back to his landing in Kondungallur near Kochi in 52 AD. The copper plates found in Malankara in Kerala date to 345 AD, and claim Christians to be Nambudhiri Brahmin converts, equal in status with the Nayars, a Kshatriya caste. These Christian communities were well well-known and integrated into the local society even as they kept their own identity. They had their position in the local caste hierarchy, and granted ritual status equivalent to the Nayars. This was an ethnic Christianity that made no organized effort at proselytizing. They lived in harmony with the local communities, but did not spread beyond (Heredia, 2007).

This harmony was disrupted with the coming of the Portuguese. For the Portuguese these Indians were 'imperfect' Christians. They attempted to Latinize them, subjecting them to a colonial episcopacy to the decrees of various ecclesiastical councils, as at the Synod of Diamper in 1599. This was vigorously resisted by the Syrian Christians as they were encompassed within the dominant regional culture and shared a common 'world' with that of the Hindus (Visvanathan, 1999). It would have compromised their status in the caste hierarchy, reducing it in the eyes of Hindus to that of the low caste converts in the Latin rite Church. The Portuguese changed the balance of power between the local Christians and their rulers in areas where they held sway. Though their dominance at the sea did not survive the Dutch onslaught and they were replaced on the east coast by the French, they did leave their marks in the colonies of Goa, Daman and Diu on the east

coast. In 1510, Portuguese commander Alfonso de Albuquerque, at the request of the local Hindus in Goa to free them of Muslim rule in Bijapur, took Goa after defeating Adil Shah and went on to consolidate Portuguese possessions in India (Heredia, 2007)

Albuquerque began with a pragmatic policy of non-interference in religious affairs. This was contested once the Franciscans arrived in 1517. The Charter of 1526 accepted the local customary laws of inheritance and included the maintenance of temples. But coercive legislations came in 1540 which were called 'Rigour of Mercy'. A policy of 'convert or leave' was put in place which did not allow for 'strange gods' before them. Their images were to be broken or destroyed. However, in the lucrative port city of Diu, in Gujarat they were more pragmatic, sparing the temples there lest the flight of Hindu bania (merchant) community brought commerce to a halt (Robinson 1998: 65). Portuguese oppression did meet with some violent resistance as the massacre of some Jesuit missionaries and their collaborators at Cuncolim in 1583 testifies. Though many Hindus did migrate across the borders and settled outside of Portuguese territories, most chose to stay and accept the new religion. However, their gradual Christianization after conversion was a syncretic process over generations in which local custom persisted with Christian practice. There were places where whole villages converted to maintain the village unity, which was necessarily implicated as the lands were held in common. By the end of the seventeenth century, Christians were a majority in the old conquests of the Goa islands.

The Christianizing influence of the Portuguese was not confined to Goa and its possessions to the north especially around Bassein, now Vasai, near Mumbai. It stretched all along the Malabar and Coromandel coasts in south India, where conversions were mainly among the fisher folk and the lower castes. These missions were subject to the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of Goa who in 1886 was given the title of Patriarch of the East Indies. The Portuguese government sustained these missions under the royal right of the patronage that allowed them to name the bishops in their territory in return for their material support of those churches. For communities such as the Mukkuvars and Paravas at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, there were advantages for them in aligning with the Portuguese. These were not just economic and political, for religious conversion further affirmed a new cultural identity even if this was still a socially contested one (Heredia, 2007).

However, as Portuguese power waned so did their support to the missions. In response, the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith was founded in 1622 under the direct jurisdiction of the Papacy in Rome, thus beginning a new era in Church history. Conversion to Christianity in Goa was dependent on ecclesiastical and political power. Without colonial patronage, this could not be replicated in territories outside colonial dominance. So Jesuits successfully initiated a bold venture in religious adaptation and cultural dialogue. They aimed at disengaging Christianity from its western cultural moorings and present it not as the local religion of Europe but as a universal religion with a message for all humankind. They keenly studied the alien cultures they encountered in an effort to understand in order to be understood. In Goa, Thomas Stevens attempted to make the New Testament story more accessible to the indigenous population with his *Krista Purana* in the local language. This is now an acknowledged classic (ibid: 58-60).

Further south, Robert de Nobili came to the Madurai mission in 1606 and soon distanced himself from low caste 'Parangis' and colonial missionaries to set up his ashram and adopted the lifestyle of an ascetic. He mastered Tamil and Sanskrit and learnt the Vedas. His vision was that of a completely indigenized church, situated within the Indian cultural traditions, served by a Christian *sanyasi* priesthood, using Sanskrit as its ritual language. But he had to compromise on caste, eschewing contact with lower castes to make himself acceptable to the higher castes. Even then he had to justify his methods at the Synod in Goa in 1619, presided by the archbishop. For a while, his arguments prevailed. Though he too had to adjust by introducing a band of '*pandarasamis*' in 1640, missionary priests to administer to the lower castes (ibid: 62).

The Protestant Reformation in Europe in the sixteenth century did not inspire a missionary undertaking till almost a century later. The Lutheran missionaries arrived in India some 200 years after the Portuguese captured Goa. Two German Lutherans, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutschau landed at the Danish Port of Tranquebar near Chennai in 1706. By 1707, nine Tamils were converted, the Bible was translated to Tamil in 1714 and the first Tamil Pastor was ordained in 1734. The Protestants followed the earlier trail of the Catholics as they covered Thanjavur, Mayavaram, Cuddalore and Ramanathapuram (ibid: 62-63)..

In 1799, at Srirampur near Kolkata, William Carey with his two young colleagues, Joshua Marshman and William Word, began the specialized study of Indian languages. The Bible was translated into a dozen Indian languages and Carey himself became a professor of Bengali and Sanskrit at Fort William College in Kolkata.

In its early period, the British East India Company did not welcome Christian missionaries since it felt that their proselytizing would antagonize the local population and compromise their commercial interests and they also felt that it was unfair on the part of the missionaries to criticize something that they did not understand. It took a struggle for the missionaries who used their support at home, to get the 'Pious Clause' proposed by Charles Grant, allowing them into territories controlled by the Company, accepted into the Company Charter in 1813. As the Company had already become unpopular in England there were many people who were ready to attack the renewal of the Charter in case they felt that the Company was antagonistic towards evangelization of India. The duties of the evangelists were clearly demarcated by the Missionary societies who were supposed to 'remember their sacred purpose and not be swayed by political matters. But the boundary between religion and politics were not always water-tight and sometimes they got mixed up (Visvanathan, 2000: 227-28).

Later the Christianizing role of the missionaries in the colonies was perceived as complementary to the civilizing mission of the British. After the Revolt of 1857, the reforming zeal of the government somewhat waned. The missionaries too were disheartened by their lack of success with people at large and turned to more indirect methods like education and charitable 'works of mercy' as local religious traditions proved quite resilient, even though western education was accepted. Caste was a major obstacle to religious conversion. People's social relationships were inexorably tied into the hierarchical system that ruled their lives. Upper castes, especially Brahmins, were less opposed to converting, when they were allowed to keep their ritual caste purity on which their social status depended. Their conversion in any significant numbers became a distant dream. Attention was then shifted to the lower castes and marginalized people who began to approach the missionaries, seeking their help for various reasons. (Heredia, 2007: 61-65).

The Civilising Mission

The supposed primitivism of the adivasis was given prominence in the writings of missionaries from the early 19th century onwards. It was alleged that such communities could be 'saved' and 'civilised' through conversion to Christianity. Walter Elliot, a prominent missionary in south India, thus noted the "barbarism" of the Marvars and Kallars and the supposed custom of human sacrifices "Meriahs" by the Khonds of Ganjam district. Such an idea was disseminated by the Anglican missionary journal called *Church Missionary Intelligencer*, which printed studies by missionaries about races, castes and tribes. Likewise, C M Edward, a missionary working in Hubli for the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, noted in a report on Lambadas and other criminal tribes that dacoity was like a trade for them, handed down by their forefathers and that they took pride in it. He pronounced that "the Lambadas do not consider a man to be worth his salt unless he has proved himself an expert thief, even women will not marry if the man did not prove to be a successful robber", and he argued that the Lambadas were forced to live in that miserable condition in the hands of police because of the exclusiveness of the caste system which did not permit them to change their occupation and consequently they were ignored in mainstream society which cast them out (Bhukya, 2008).

In a similar vein, in 1911, the nomadic trading community of Yerukulas in Madras presidency were declared a criminal tribe. This was under a legislation called the Criminal Tribes Act, which applied to the whole of British India. One of its provisions included the establishment of special settlements where the 'criminal' tribe communities could be confined in order to reform them. Missionary organisations such as the Salvation Army were given charge of these settlements and were given more or less complete autonomy as far as administration of these settlements was concerned. Their nomadic lifestyle implied a potential lack of control; their frequent change of residences meant shifting loyalties to different patrons, and so they were considered as perennially disloyal; the impossibility of taxing them, or raising any kind of revenue out of them, unlike their sedentary counterparts was probably a major nuisance for the administration. In addition, for the keepers of social morality, their lack of visible social institutions implied complete disorder in their community life (Radhakrishna, 2000).

In this, the missionary view was mostly in common with the anthropometric understanding of official ethnographers. This propaganda encouraged them to take their conversion agenda into tribal society, and they were successful in certain areas, notably in north-east India. Missionary ethnography also largely converged with official ethnography, for it saw the liberation of criminal tribes, and for that matter the entire liberation of Indian, as lying in the modernisation agenda of the colonial state (Bhukya: 2008).

The tribal church in Chhotanagpur, covering the present states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and parts of Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal and Odisha, represents a well established indigenous Christianity. Its story goes back to 1845, when the first Lutheran missionaries arrived from Kolkata and took up residence on the outskirts of Ranchi. After five years, four tribals approached them, seeking to know about Jesus, whom they had read about in a Hindi pamphlet featuring extracts of the New Testament. On 9th June 1850 the first adult baptism took place (Heredia, 2007: 64-65).

Outsiders had come into the tribal hinterlands as moneylenders and stayed on as landlords under the Mughals, and a process of acculturation had begun. The Kabir Panth attracted Hindus, Muslims and also some tribals. In 1765, the defeated Mughal emperor conceded the *divanis* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa to the British. However, being more interested in revenue, the East India Company implemented an administrative system which was in contradiction to the traditional tribal law. The subsequent land alienation and misery gave rise to numerous revolts by the tribals, all of which were ruthlessly suppressed by the colonial administration. But once the tribals perceived the missionaries to be on their side, they began to join churches actively (ibid:65).

From Srirampur in Bengal the Protestants launched their mission in the north-east in the 1820s and 1830s. The New Testament was translated into Assamese and Khasi. In 1836, the American Baptists established a mission in Manipur though they were more successful with the Nagas in 1872. Education and medical work were seen as a positive contribution by the local people and welcomed by the government. Tribal conversions took place mainly in areas of tribal concentration, Chhotanagpur in central India and in the north-east (Heredia, 2007:64-65)

Today, the Christian population in India is by and large associated with the scheduled tribes though not vice versa. Four states in north-east India show this, correspondence to a great length. Almost the entire tribal population in Manipur and Nagaland is Christian. An overwhelming majority of the tribals in Mizoram and a large majority in Meghalaya are Christian. About one-fourth of the tribals in Assam and about one-sixth in Arunachal Pradesh is Christian too. The contrast between Manipur and Tripura, both former princely states in north-east India, in respect of Christianity is an indicator of the politics of religion. Manipur was under British administration during the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century when Christian missions entered those hills around the Imphal valley. The hills remained virtually under British occupation till independence. In the princely states of India, the Christian missions did not work. So the Christian population in the central Indian tribal settlements was low. Even in the Chhotanagpur area of Bihar where the British were interested in the forest and mineral resources, after a series of tribal revolts, the government did not find it convenient to encourage Christian missions. Since the 1930s, on the other hand, the Gandhians and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh became active in the central Indian belt to halt the growth of Christianity among the tribes (Chaube:1999).

Religious Dialogue

In India different missionary styles were given emphasis at different times for the purpose of conversion. The attitude of missionaries ranged from paternalism and accommodation to hierarchy and control (Visvanathan, 2007: 140). Even though considered as a subsidiary to colonialism, the missionaries saw themselves as the ‘conscience keepers’ of capitalism. Thus knowledge about the ‘other’ was considered necessary and a dialogue with these alien religions was a strategy (ibid: 142). For the missionaries there was no embarrassment in voicing the relationship between commerce and mission. On the contrary this bond was celebrated (ibid: 144).

At this point of time the role of native agents became very important as they were an integral part of the missionary efforts. The native catechist supported the missionary in the work of evangelisation, of pastoral engagements, in educational work as native

teacher, in medical work, in translation, etc. While the missionary initiated and supervised the work, the native agent carried out the daily tasks (ibid: 145).

The spaces created by the intricate relationship between the natives and missionaries needs to be highlighted. In chronicling the story of Krisha Pillai, Hudson (1972) shows the points of exchange between the two religions. Krishna Pillai was a high-caste Hindu, well educated in the Sri Vaisnava tradition before he converted to evangelical Protestant Christianity at the age of twenty-nine. But unlike many other converts, he did not adopt the western life-style of the missionaries. He did not become literate in English and probably could not converse in it. All of his Christian life he remained strictly vegetarian, observed the rules of purity and pollution regarding the food and caste relations, and carefully preserved his status as a Vellala, the highest group of castes among the non-Brahmans of Madras Presidency. Thus, there were important cultural continuities between his life as a Hindu and as a Christian. His cultural world remained Tamil, his religious thought in both traditions was in Tamil, and his style of life remained that of the Vellalas (Hudson, 1972: 192).

Hudson notes some of the important instances in his life which led to dialogues between the two religions and culminated in the conversion of Pillai. First was his employment as a Tamil teacher in a seminary run by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel where he gradually became convinced of Genesis 1 through Exodus 20 as a true account of creation, second was the gradual build-up of tension within himself resulting from his obligation to perform the daily ritual worship of an image of Narayana on one hand, and his own acceptance of the validity Christianity which condemned such image worship and finally, the conversion to Christianity of his younger brother and a close mutual friend in March, 1857. This last development intensified his tension and uncertainty in his own mind, creating a crisis which finally resulted in his own personal experience of Christianity. As Visvanathan (2007) very rightly notes, this conversion experience shows the ‘irreducibility of the two world views where one can be understood not in relation to the other but in opposition’.

Another example of religious dialogue can be examined through the life history of missionary Dom Henri Le Saux. He was a French Dominican monk who came to India in 1948. His life can be seen as a contrast to the conventional missionary stereotype. Like

Pillai, Henri Le Saux experienced conversion as transformation of the heart. But the dialogue he had as a Christian was full of tolerance, as he tried to live in both the worlds simultaneously which broke down the doctrinal exclusiveness between Christianity and Hinduism (Visvanathan, 2007: 151).

When Le Saux arrived in India on 15th August 1948 he considered himself as a missionary in conventional terms. After his arrival, there began a period of transition for him from European ways to Indian. He realised that he needed to visit Hindu *ashrams* to learn codes of *sanyasa*. There he met Sri Ramana Maharshi and was stirred by this experience as he continued to dream of the Maharshi even after returning to his own *ashram* (ibid: 153-155). He began to consider himself as a Hindu Christian monk and along with celibacy he also adopted vegetarianism and the code of silence (ibid: 156). This brief description of Le Saux shows the possibility of getting involved in a different world view along with holding on to one's own identity and religious faith (ibid: 158).

As Saurabh Dube puts it:

Specifically, at the heart of evangelical entanglements lay the complex making and unmaking of historical forms, social identities, ritual practices, and mythic meanings - enacted over time. The singular frame and the exclusive grid of conversion neither capture nor contain the distinctive detail and the divergent dynamic of these processes. This is to say that the terrain and temporality of the evangelical encounter query the terms of rupture and exceed the determinations of transference posited by conversion (Dube, 2004: 163)

Adivasis and the Issue of Conversion

Before delving into the subject of adivasis and the changes brought about in their society due to various forces which wanted to sanitize these so called 'primitive people', it is necessary to note that that concept of 'adivasi' is not static but their identity is being actively reconfigured.

During the colonial era, a range of disparate groups that lived for the most part in the more inaccessible hill and forest tracts, and survived largely from hunting and gathering or rudimentary agriculture, were categorised by the British as "aboriginals" or "early

tribes". They were distinguished by their clan-based systems of kinship and their "animistic" religious beliefs. Sometimes, they were defined in terms of their habitat, as "jungle tribes". In this way, a category was created, and a body of knowledge produced, about the so-called "tribes of India". In the process, scattered communities were granted a unity that they had not previously possessed (Bhukya, 2008:103).

British economic policies, which favoured individual possession of property, created a market for land, and led to the dispossession of thousands of tribal families and placed many others in a position of bondage to money-lenders. Forest and game laws had greatly reduced their right to use of the forest, and in some instances (as where shifting cultivation was banned) deprived them of their livelihood altogether. The suppression of the home distillery forced them to buy alcohol only from outlets licensed by the state, and got them into contact with a most 'degraded type of alien', the liquor contractor. The Indian Penal Code and the Indian Forest Act formed two pillars of a huge, alien system of jurisprudence which ran counter to tribal custom, subjecting them to endless harassment at distant courts, at the hands of lawyers, lawyer's touts, and ill informed judges (Guha: 1996).

The Scheduled Tribes are today an administrative category, constitutionally defined by the presidential decree. Since independence, the Government of India's tribal policy was first articulated by the 'panchsheel' proposed by Nehru in 1959. This was to integrate tribals into the national mainstream, keeping their distinctiveness; not to assimilate into it, in case it be lost; nor to isolate them from it, leaving them behind. However the development model imposed on them has been oppressively disruptive for the tribal society. Those at the margins of a society are inevitably disadvantaged and exploited because of the unequal exchange between centre and periphery. With the tribals it has meant both economic exploitation and cultural alienation, violating their dignity and their identity (Heredia, 2007: 248).

Baviskar (2005) in her article 'Adivasi Encounters with Hindu Nationalism in MP' examines how the collective identity has come to be fashioned over time. According to her, the use of the general term *adivasi* (literally, "original dwellers") or "indigenous people" for the groups classified under the Constitution as scheduled tribes in India has now become commonplace. Despite its common usage in everyday discourse, scholars

have expressed their reservations about the applicability of terms such as "tribe" and "indigenous people" in the Indian context (Beteille 1998). Andre Beteille points to the theoretical and practical difficulties of distinguishing adivasis from the castes around them, given their long histories of cultural exchange. Other scholars such as G S Ghurye have pointed to the colonial origin of the term and its evolution in the imperatives of imperialist politics (Ghurye: 1963). Sundar (1997) also presents a nuanced account of the multiple ideologies and interests at work in colonial and post-colonial practices regarding "tribes. The colonial powers created sociological and epistemological categories through law and other state-organised activities such as census records, gazetteers, ethnographies, etc. Consequently, these categories outlived the colonial rule and determined asked by future generation of researchers and also affected the self perception of those being researched. And this is most striking in the case of *adivasis*. The term 'adivasi' (or tribe, indigenous people, aborigines) is not easily dismissed (Baviskar, 2005: 5106).

Various conventions of the International Labour Organisation from 1957 onwards and the Working Group on Indigenous Populations set up by the United Nations have sought to protect the interests of "indigenous and other tribal and semi-tribal populations" (Xaxa 1999:3590). As a signatory, the Indian government is bound by several of these conventions. The rights of adivasis are protected under the Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution which designate adivasi-populated parts of the country as subject to special laws and procedures. These rights have recently been added under the Panchayati Raj Act for Scheduled Areas (PESA) and may be further augmented by the proposed Scheduled Tribes (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (Baviskar 2005)

Even more important, various social groups- Bhil, Bhilala, Gond, Santhal, Munda, and hundreds of others whose presence is depicted by clusters dotted across the demographic map of India - use the term *adivasi* to define themselves as a collectivity and to stake claim to material and symbolic resources. The combined weight of international and national law, administrative practice, similar histories, and political internalisation by the people thus designated, has imparted to the term a legitimacy that is hard to ignore. Once created, the concept of *adivasi* has taken on a life of its own, animated by the complex social practices that have accrued around it. It has become a part of received wisdom, internalised and acted upon (ibid: 5106).

As Baviskar notes, “to respect the political weight of the concept is not to subscribe to the implicit notion of essential difference that it invokes, but to recognise the power of this regime of representation”. Are those groups who are designated as *adivasis*, and who identify themselves as *adivasis*, characterised by any "objective" markers of subordinate status and social deprivation? In terms of economic and political indicators, it is easy to make the general case that *adivasis* in peninsular India lag behind the average Indian with respect to basic human development indicators such as income, literacy, life expectancy, infant mortality, and the like. The poverty of *adivasis* is generally linked to a lack of access to productive resources, whether land-based or industrial-urban. Poverty is combined with political powerlessness that constrains their ability to bargain for secure and remunerative livelihoods. More and more *adivasis* today make up the gangs of seasonal labourers migrating in search of wage employment to urban centres and areas of intensive agriculture (ibid).

As Baviskar points out, the failure of the welfare state to significantly improve the lives of *adivasis* is evident in their impoverished everyday lives. Deprivation is not a natural state for *adivasis*; it is produced and reproduced by the policies and practices that characterize India's post-colonial development. The landscape that *adivasis* reside in has been the internal frontier for the expansion of the Indian economy - a source of minerals and timber, a location for mines, dams and heavy industries, and they have experienced the subsequent erosion of their agriculture and forest-based economy. Economic and political subordination is reinforced by the ideology of caste pollution and purity. Unconverted *adivasis* face the social stigma of being considered "savage" and "backward" by dominant groups such as caste Hindus as well as by Muslims and Christians. This stigma facilitates the brutal, often sadistic, treatment meted out to *adivasis* by dominant groups (Baviskar, 2005: 5106).

The idea of 'indigenous people' is an issue of extensive debate in India. This was hardly so till a few years ago. In fact, social workers, administrators, politicians and even scholars widely used the term to refer to a certain category of people. There were no qualms about the usage of native equivalent of this term, i.e. 'adivasi'. Ghurye (1963) had of course some reservation to the use of such terms; the expression he used was 'so-called aborigines'. Again it is they who took the term along with all the prejudices and conjectures to the masses'. That is how the identity of *adivasis* has entered into the

consciousness of the tribal people. The identity that was forced upon them from outside precisely to mark out differences from the dominant community has now been internalised by the people themselves. Not only has it become an important mark of social differentiation and identity assertion but also an important tool of articulation for empowerment.

The term *tribe*

The Anthropological Survey of India under the 'People of India Project' identified 461 tribal communities in India. They are enumerated at 67,583,800 persons constituting 8.08 per cent of the total population as per the 1991 census. The share of the scheduled tribe population to the total population in 1971 and 1981 was 6.94 and 7.85 per cent respectively. The question of tribes in India is closely linked with administrative and political considerations. Hence there has been increasing demand by groups and communities for their inclusion in the list of scheduled tribes of the Indian Constitution. That partly explains the steady increase in the proportion of the scheduled tribe population in India especially in the period between 1971 and 1981. There has been more concern with the identification of tribes than with their definition. The conception of the term became evident from the use of criteria that were adopted. These ranged from such features as geographical isolation, simple technology and condition of living, general backwardness to the practice of animism, tribal language, physical features, etc. The problem however lay in the fact that they were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied. One set of criteria was used in one context and quite another in another context. The result is that the list includes groups and communities strikingly different from each other in respect of not only size of the population but also the level of technology and other characteristics (Xaxa, 1999: 3589).

The early ethnographers were not very clear about the distinction between caste and tribe in India. The 18th century writings, for example, showed synonymous use of the term tribe with caste. Later it was even used in a related manner as one could see in the use of phrase 'caste and tribes of India' by Risley and many others in their writings. Efforts to make a distinction between the two began to be made after initiative was taken to collect detailed information about the people for the census. The census officials were however

far from clear with regard to the criterion of distinction. It is with the 1901 census that one finds a mention of criteria howsoever inadequate that may be. It defined tribes as those who practised animism. In the subsequent censuses animism was replaced by the tribal religion. Although the criterion so introduced was highly unsatisfactory, it continued to be used widely and extensively (Xaxa: 1999).

In the colonial ethnography, the concern shown by the British administrators-scholars was to mark off tribe from caste. Hence tribes were shown to be living in complete isolation from the rest of the population and therefore with-out any interaction or interrelation with them. In contrast the main concern in the native ethnography has been to show close interaction of the tribes with the larger society or the civilisation. Ghurye (1963) , for example, stressed the nature of interaction between tribes and the larger Hindu society and the ways in which tribes have been drawn into the Hindu society. He stressed similarities between the two societies. Sinha (1958) even goes to the extent of viewing tribes as a dimension of little tradition that cannot be adequately understood unless it is seen in relation to the great tradition. In view of such conception, tribes have come to be primarily studied in relation to features and characteristics of the larger society. The focus is on how tribes are getting absorbed into the larger society, the so-called mainstream, by becoming caste, peasant, class and so on (Sinha as cited by Xaxa, 1999: 3590).

With such conceptualisation, the identity of the tribal group or community has been put at a risk. This is because of the way tribes have been conceptualised in anthropological literature and the reference with which tribal society in India is studied. Tribes are primarily seen as a stage and type of society. They represent a society that is deficient in the so called positive traits of the modern society and thus constitutes a simple, illiterate and backward society. With change in these features on account of education, modern occupation, new technology, etc, tribal society is no longer considered to be tribal. When the transformation is in the direction of caste society then it is described as having become caste society. If the reference is peasant then it is posited as the peasant society and if the general direction of transformation is social differentiation, then it is described as differentiated or stratified, and thus ceases to be tribal society. As Xaxa puts it “In the process it is forgotten that tribe besides being a stage and type of society is also a society alike and similar to any other kind of society, say the Oriya or the Bengali. But it is precisely this that comes to be denied on account of the changed situation. Of course it is

true that the tribes are not of the same stage and type as Bengali or Oriya societies. There is then something clumsy about the use of the term tribe in describing the Indian social reality” (Xaxa, 1999: 3590).

Thurston's *Ethnographic Notes* is a huge volume that deals with marriage customs, idolatrous cults, sacrifices, hook swinging rituals, witchcrafts, mantras (spells), earth eating, and other exotica. In case of adivasis, he either tries to find a connection of their practices with those of the Hindus, or over stresses their peculiarity as evidence of a supposed primitivism. For example, he elevates the Kurubas of Nilgiri hills to the level of Pandavas, as they had a custom of marrying several brothers to one wife. The marriage ceremony of the Savara tribe of Ganjam was compared with "lord" Krishna's romance with Rukmini, as the Savara boy would traditionally go to a girl's house, plunge an arrow into its thatched roof, take away an empty pot, and then, when the girl went to the stream for water, he would capture her and take her into the forest, after which they would return and get married. Similarly, Thurston linked the marriage ceremony of the Lambadas of south India with the brahmanical *saptapadi* (seven feet), which is an essential part of Hindu marriages, as they went around two grain-pounding pestles seven times. This sort of description, which merged the identity of the adivasis into the Hindu fold, was later replicated by Hindu propagandists. Hindu organisations like the *Rashtriya Swayam Sangh* and *Vishwa Hindu Parishad* have, taking their cue from such texts, been converting adivasis to Hinduism by sprinkling Ganga 'jal' (water of the Ganga) over their heads, a sort of purification act. In other respects, Thurston primitivises the adivasis, branding them as *homo-Dravida* and similar to Australian aboriginals. He exoticises them in a number of ways, for example he claims that the Kois of Godavari district place some pests (animals) in the hand or mouth of dead bodies and bury or burn those. He emphasised their common practice of making fire through friction with two pieces of wood - a supposedly "primitive" custom. This gave a negative connotation to adivasi life and culture; they were portrayed as examples of primitive civilisation and "museumised" (as cited by Bhukya, 2008: 106)

Ghurye argued that the adivasis of India were Hindus for the simple reason that they were born on Indian soil, worshipped Hindu gods, and spoke the same regional languages as caste Hindus. He also strongly opposed the enumeration of tribals in the census under the separate category of "animists". Although he used the term "aboriginal" in this book, he

later rejected it, as well as the term *adivasi*, as both implied that they were the original inhabitants of India who had been usurped by invaders. He argued that such terms helped to create communal blocs. In the second edition of the book, published in 1954, he changed the title to “The Scheduled Tribes of India”, and designated the *adivasis* as “backward Hindus”. He claimed that the primitive tribal people had been gradually civilised by the Hindus, and that contact with Hindu society had benefited them in a multitude of ways.

In this, he ignored the many studies that provided strong evidence that this contact had been often devastating for the *adivasis*. In all this, his viewpoint was strongly tempered by the politics of Hindu nationalism. As Hardiman has argued: “it is a historical and dialectical process that in any given society is a synthesis arising out of pre-existing social systems”. The contact between twice-born castes and lower castes and *adivasis* produces over the years a new amalgamation that might not be unambiguously “Hindu”. Kosambi demonstrates the coexistence of mixed cultures where Guru Nanak and Kabir were worshipped by subordinate groups. They could not be understood as either “Hindu”, “Sikh” or “Muslim”. Although while it is true that many communities tended towards the Hindu model, their demand surfaced within the colonial context and within the demographic politics of colonial rule, and it was as much a socio-political as a religious one (Hardiman and Kosambi as cited by Bhukya, 2008: 108).

Today, a large number of the tribal population are poor, being either landless labour or marginal cultivators. Over the years the interaction with the non tribals, they have converted to Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism or Islam. The tribal people in India do not constitute a homogeneous category economically, politically, culturally and socially. Under their present living conditions, much of their traditional worldview has been lost. They have launched political movements from time to time (Savyasachi, 2001: 71).

Since ancient times, Indian tribes have been assimilated into the Hindu society and accorded caste status according to their political and economic strengths. The religious integration involved, on the part of the tribes, the adoption of brahminical rituals and gods and, on the part of the host society, the lending of brahminical services. Beyond the north-west frontier Islam did not penetrate the tribal societies in India. Only Lakshadweep came under the influence of Islam through contact with the Arab traders (Chaube, 1999: 525).

While 'Hindu' is a society within which different religions (faiths and modes of worship) operate, Islam or Christianity is a religion within which different social structures operate. 'Hindwi' (Hindu) is a geographical term first used by India's western neighbours and carried into the early western writings about India. Indologists like Max Muller saw it as a social order defined by the 'varna' system, which upheld brahminical hegemony and within which 'jatis' (castes) had different slots permitting what Bose called "the Hindu method of tribal absorption". The British census officials ignored the view, adopted caste as peculiar to Hindu religion and decided to record as tribals groups, which had not been casteised (Bose as cited by Chaube: 1999).

But as they had to work with Hindu subordinates mostly, the census officials soon ran into problems that have been aptly summarised by Kingsley Davis

It is hard in practice to draw a line between advanced primitive religions on the one hand and backward Hinduism on the other...Hinduism is so syncretistic that it embraces almost every conceivable religious practice, and the Hindu social order is so pervasive that it infiltrates nearly every social group...Nearly always, therefore, there is some remote basis for label-ling a primitive tribesman as Hindu, and he, being illiterate, is often incapable of asserting himself in the matter. Moreover, because of the vagueness and inclusiveness of Hinduism, the enumerator tends to regard it as a residual category. Any person in India is thus a Hindu unless he definitely proves that he is something else" (Davis as cited by Chaube, 1999 : 525-526).

In the days of competitive religious politics inaugurated in the 1920s, enrolling the tribals into any of the major religious denominations, namely, Christian and Hindu, available to the tribals, became a political task of the census staff resulting in a steady decline in the number of the followers of 'other religions and persuasions' (i e, other than Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain and Muslim). Between 1921 and 1951 the population share of the Hindus in India rose from 84.40 per cent to 86.89 per cent (partly due to migrations following the partition in 1947); that of the Christians from 1.79 to 2.35 per cent while the share of 'other religions and persuasions' (ORP) fell from 3.26 per cent to 0.52 per cent (ibid: 525).

Savyasachi observes that an important component of the adivasi perception of autonomy is self- rule grounded in their tradition. The right to tradition is a right to a worldview.

During and after colonial rule, the political and social processes that accompanied modernisation pushed the forest dwellers outside the forest. The British policy was designed to regulate tribal upsurges and revolts in order that the people could be socialised into leading a settled life outside the forest so that the forest could be used for commercial purposes. Areas predominantly inhabited by un-reconciled tribal populations were mainly under military control; these were called unregulated areas. In other areas civilians were exclusively employed to look after the administration. These were called Regulation Districts and were governed by laws made under the charter called Regulations Acts. In 1874, the Scheduled District Act was promulgated; enabling the government to notify what laws should be enforced in the Scheduled Districts. Later, the Government of India Act 1935, provided for the reservation of certain predominantly aboriginal areas from the operation of the Provincial Legislature.

This policy was responsible for encouraging deforestation and for the formulation of the tribal question in the form that we know today. This policy legally separated the tribal people from the rest of the society, laying the ground for the question whether they should be left or assimilated into mainstream life. The underlying methodology was to first take them out of the discourse. This created the condition which led the tribal people into forgetting their worldview, their work culture, and their voices of protest and then recast their identity and role in the image of the identity of a nation state that has been constructed on the basis of selective memory of its history (Savyasachi, 2001: 77).

The Constituent Assembly uncritically continued with this British policy. The regulative legislation was thus translated as the fifth and sixth schedules of the Constitution. The process of deforestation and acculturation went alongside the process that led to the classification of a tribal people, whether or not they live in the forest, under these schedules.

During the British period the first generation of displaced forest dwellers worked as wage labour on plantations and in agricultural fields. Poor, illiterate and not being able to earn a livelihood, they became either Hindus or Christians, in the process of becoming literate. Acculturation of the tribal people by the Christians and the Hindus over the years has changed their social structure, cultural value patterns, and modes of thinking and codes of conduct. They have adopted Hindu and Christian social manners and customs to varying

degrees, depending on the nature and intensity of interaction with them. This process has been described as sanskritization and westernization. It has delineated people according to the norms of participation delineated by the processes of modern industrial production. This has changed their memory patterns developed as forest dwellers (ibid : 79).

Rise of Hindutva: When Conversion becomes an act of Treason

People often use religion to identify themselves as distinct from others, but when such a religious community seeks political expression in a nation-state of its own, religion functions as a political ideology rather than a spiritual faith. Modernity brings about a lot of changes in a society which includes less flattering ones such as new forms of inequalities and injustices, unfamiliar domination and exploitation whose intensity can mask the memories of former atrocities. A successful modernity can bring insecurities, uncertainties and alienation with which a society may not be able to deal and thus the modernizing state becomes the source of its discontent and in order to escape the present problems the past gets reconstructed as 'golden' (Jaffrelot:1993). Religious revivalism follows as religion is among the most common and most effective of identity markers of such movements providing an explosive mix of religion and politics in religious nationalism. Religious nationalism politicizes religion and tries to establish the whims of the majority. It puts a premium on the religious homogeneity in its quest for national identity. Dominant groups exploit this to establish their hegemony over others in the name of national unity and tolerance is perceived as a sign of weakness (Heredia: 2007).

Before examining the circumstances or widely held assumptions under which conversions become a contentious issue, arouse widespread and violent passions, it is essential to note that, religious communities need to have become crystallised, come to be seen as having firm and fixed boundaries, so that the crossing of borders becomes a dramatic, one-shot matter. Such developed 'community-consciousness', however, is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the development of what 20th century Indian English has come to call 'communalism': when, obviously, conversions become controversial on a qualitatively higher scale. This requires, not just the transition from 'fuzzy' to 'enumerated' communities (Kaviraj as cited by Sarkar :1999) drew our attention to, conflict of interest such that, in a kind of zero-sum game, the gain of one community is thought to invariably

involve the loss of the other (ibid, 1999: 1692). But such exclusivity of identity without any points of exchange can also be contested as Visvanathan (1993) shows in her study of the history, beliefs and practices of the Syrian Christian community in Kerala, where the converts carried on the baggage of their previous identities along with assuming a new one. This work provides a good explanation of the relationship of indigenous and Hindu concepts such as astrology, *vaastu shastra*, etc on some of the beliefs and practices of the Syrian Christians. This relationship becomes most noticeable in the rituals of marriage, birth and death. These rituals, also being linked to public Christian rituals, convey the integration of the different belief systems especially well.

The Hindu nationalist movement in India has existed in various forms for over a century, for example in the 19th century, a number of socio-religious reform movements attempted to gather support amongst Hindus. Jaffrelot notes that these movements represented primarily a reaction to the threat of western domination and especially to a two-fold cultural challenge, the utilitarian reformism and Christian proselytism. People like Raja Ram Mohan Roy tried to reform Hinduism by resorting to precepts of Christianity and Western rationalism. In claiming that vedic society was at least as monotheistic and as respectful of the individual as the Christian west, the socio-religious reform movements attributed to their history the prestigious values the Europeans were so proud of and tried to legitimise at the same time cultural institutions like the caste system under the idealised garb of the varna. The syncretism of this movement is strategic also because it consists in assimilating the other's practices to resist him more effectively (Jaffrelot: 1993).

But at no time have these feelings been more powerful in the socio-political landscape of India than it is today. The movement is united by the common desire to purge the country of all “foreign” (i.e., Muslim and Christian) influences and to establish India as a Hindu nation. Although violence between Hindu nationalists and Muslim communities in India has a long history, large scale violence between Hindus and Christians is relatively unprecedented.

Hansen (1999) examining the history and contemporary articulations of Hindu nationalist movements, writes:

Hindu nationalism has emerged and taken shape neither in the political system as such nor in the religious field, but in the broader realm of what we may call public culture-the public space in which a society and its constituent individuals and communities imagine, represent, and recognize themselves through political discourse, commercial and cultural expressions, and representations of state and civic organizations. The Hindu nationalists desire to transform Indian public culture into a sovereign, disciplined national culture rooted in what is claimed to be a superior ancient Hindu past, and to impose a corporatist and disciplined social and potential organization upon society. According to the movement, the Indian nation can only be reinvigorated when its rightful proprietors, the Hindu majority, resurrect, a strong sense of Hindutva (Hinduness). This majoritarian call for Hindutva combines well-established paternalistic and xenophobic discourses with democratic and universalist discourses on rights and entitlements and has successfully articulated desires, anxieties, and fractured subjectivities in both urban and rural India (Hansen 1999: 4).

The word Hindutva gained currency after it appeared as the title of a book written by V.D. Savarkar first published in 1923. The full title of V.D. Savarkar's tract: Hindutva: Who is a Hindu? identifies the two core issues which he addresses: (1) who is a Hindu, and (2) what is Hindutva. The two issues are connected. He defines a Hindu as one who (1) regards the entire subcontinent as his (or her) motherland/fatherland (2) is descended of Hindu parents and (3) and considers this land holy. These then constitute the three "essentials of Hindutva a common nation (Rashtra), a common race (Jati) and a common civilization (Sanskriti)" (ib. 116). It is interesting to note that religion does not figure in this ensemble and the "actual essentials of Hindutva are ... also the ideal essentials of nationality". The net effect of this exercise is to confer a Hindu nationality on all the followers of the four religions of Indian origin-Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism (Savarkar as cited by Sharma: 2002).

Up until the attainment of Independence in 1947 the driving force of the Hindutva movement, as represented by the Hindu Mahasabha and the RSS, was first to oppose what was viewed as a policy of appeasement towards the Muslims and to contest the move towards the Partition of India, which was viewed as the logical outcome of this policy. During this phase the Hindutva movement was not about gaining political power. This shift in Hindutva thinking came about as an outcome of reflection at the ease with which the party in power, the Indian National Congress, could suppress the Hindutva forces in the wake of the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948. This realization led to the formation of the Jan Sangh in 1951. During the period when the Jan Sangh functioned as a party, the concept of Hindutva underwent an ideological shift. It took the form of

identifying India with Hindutva, rather than Hindutva with India. As a result there was much talk of the need for Indianizing the Christian and Muslim minorities in India, rather than Hinduizing them. This might seem insignificant to the outsider but it reflected a subtle rearrangement within Hindutva. It should be noted that the Indian government, both in the language of the Indian Constitution adopted in 1950, and subsequent legislation, has virtually adopted the Hindutva definition of a Hindu-as one who belongs to any religion of Indian origin. Hence the need, in the modern study of Hinduism, to distinguish one who is Hindu under Indian law from one who is Hindu "by religion" (Sharma, 2002: 23-24).

Its agenda has been to thereby solve the problem of the presence of non-Hindu elements in Indian society and polity, primarily of the Muslims and Christians, and secondarily of such Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs as do not respond to the general interpretation of the term 'Hindu' it offers. By inviting them to partake only of Hindu culture and not religion, it wants to make it socially easier for these communities to become parts of the larger whole. It seeks to accomplish the same end politically by identifying itself with the aspiration of nationhood, as opposed to the machinery of a state, so that all could then belong to the Hindu nation in this reconstituted society and the state could then be effectively secular. It is significant that the Hindutva rhetoric to this day has largely and centrally been that of a nation (Hindu Rashtra) rather than of a state (Hindu Raj) (Savarkar as cited by Sharma: 2002).

All this has been made possible by a wide, though very far from universal, degree of consent, where large numbers may keep away from communal riots, maybe, even sincerely criticize them, and yet be participants in a kind of communal consensus in which a whole series of assumptions and myths have turned into common sense. Far from being a spontaneous or 'natural' product of popular will expressing a legitimate 'Hindu hurt', however, as the organised forces of Hindutva sedulously propagate, this consent is something constructed and carefully nurtured a product of more than 60 years of strenuous and patient effort.

The RSS, founded way back in 1925, and spawning from the 1950s a whole series of affiliates manned at crucial levels by its cadres (among which the Jan Sangh/BJP and the VHP have been the most important), concentrated for many years on unostentatious,

slow, 'cultural' work. The RSS has long recognised the importance of education to any project of gaining power and reorienting the political arena. Its educational front, Vidya Bharati, runs one of the largest private networks of schools across the country, catering mainly to lower middle class students. Other RSS fronts providing education include the Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (VKA), which specialises in hostels for adivasi children among other activities; Sewa Bharati (for dalits), and the Ekal Vidyalaya Foundation which runs single teacher pre-school centres where children are taught basic reading, writing, Sanskrit and *sanskars* or good behaviour (Sundar, 2004: 1605).

As against being a space where children can transcend their religious identities and begin to learn about other cultures or develop faculties for critical enquiry, the school becomes an extension of the kind of religious discourse that is imparted in temples (ibid:1609). The RSS educational and political agenda includes both absorbing subaltern groups into a Hindu fold to fight against 'minorities' and using violence against these same groups in order to perpetuate the existing social order (ibid:1611).

The *Shakhas* combined physical training of young men with indoctrination through *bauddhik* sessions. According to Jaffrelot (1993) the most interesting point is the presence within the *shakha* of members of the so called backward castes and untouchables which bears testimony to its social inclusiveness. So, from a sociological point of view the individual becomes the elementary unit of the nation, and the sect is the only Hindu social institution where individualism is prominent, the holistic caste system being kept at bay. Along with this, a chain of schools was built up, ideas were disseminated through personal contact and conversation, and even a very popular Hindi comic series was brought out (the Amar Chitra Katha praising Hindu mythical or historical figures). It was for long, almost, a process of building up hegemony through seemingly trivial processes. Then, in the early and middle 1980s, there were the efforts of Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi to play the 'Hindu card' communalising the state apparatus on a record scale through the anti-Sikh pogrom of 1984 and the consequent cover-up of the guilty, and further eroding the rule of law through rampant corruption (Sarkar,1993 : 164).

All this directly prepared the ground for the Ram Janma-bhoomi confrontation of the Sangh Parivar, which was led by the VHP. Moreover, it was the Congress government that updated the Ramayana epic into a pseudo-nationalist TV serial, and allowed access in

1986 to the idols installed inside the Babri Masjid by stealth and administrative collusion in December 1949, under an earlier Congress regimen (ibid: 164). The Sangh Parivar's war of position now gave place to a spectacular war of movement, pressing into service the latest in advertising and audio-visual techniques on a scale and with resources never before seen on the subcontinent. Sarkar compares this with Hitler who had also been a bit of a pioneer in these matters, fully realising the importance of spoken propaganda through the then relatively new techniques of the loudspeaker and the radio. One of the major tactic of the Parivar has been the creation and projection of an enemy image through appropriating stray elements from past prejudices, combining them with new ones skilfully dressed up as old verities, and broadcasting the resultant compound through the most up-to-date media techniques (ibid:165). Though these arguments have explained the socio-political dimensions, they have not adequately examined the religious dynamics of the context which Peter van der Veer calls "narration by the aggressor" (Veer as cited by Kim, 2003: 164). In this case the aggressors constantly expressed their resentment towards the Christian campaign of conversion, particularly in the tribal areas. According to Kim (2003), it was not religion that was used by politically motivated Hindus but the religious pursuit of 'sacred space' was expressed in a claim on the territory of the sacred place. Hindu leaders regarded tribals as being at the boundary of the Hindu fold, and it was interference with this space which provoked them to react (ibid; 165).

The Hindu- Christian debate was intensified after the publication of Arun Shourie's book *Missionaries in India* (1994) which revealed Hindu resentment against Christian conversion. While praising Christian missionaries for their work, dedication and study of Hindu scriptures, he argued that in the process of their work, they had 'completely destroyed not only the self- confidence but also the self-respect' of the Hindus and even made them 'feel ashamed' of their traditions. He also opined that the missionaries' 'ultimate object' had always been to convert Hindus as they believed that their salvation was dependent upon conversion, and that conversion was the 'keystone of the Christianity of the Church' and its 'principal preoccupation'. This premise of Christianity, as Shourie saw it, was based on the Christian claims of 'one Prophet, one Text, one Church' (Shourie, 1994: 7-18).

The responses to Shourie's claims were varied. Some Christian and moderate Hindu respondents were very critical of Shourie and his motives in publishing the book,

believing that he was setting up Christians as a new 'target' for Hindu fundamentalism after Ayodhya. His attitude towards Christian mission was termed as one of 'sheer ingratitude' for the contributions the missionaries had made to India. He was also criticized for selective use of quotations from the colonial period because they were inconsistent, outdated, out of context or exaggerated. Some defended the missionaries, arguing that Christian schools and hospitals could not have ulterior motives since, in spite of the alleged efforts of the missionaries, the numbers of converts were low (Kim 2003: 146).

It needs to be emphasised that this distinction between developed community consciousness and communalism is important precisely because tendencies exist that virtually equate the latter with any firmly-bounded religious identity. These operate from two diametrically opposed points of view. Datta pointed out that communalism is distinctive among ideologies in its refusal to name itself. There is rather the constant effort at identification with religious community, as well as, for Hindu majoritarian communalists, with nationalism (Datta as cited by Sarkar, 1999). For instance the very term 'hindutva' which literally means no more than 'Hindu-ness', but has come to be the self-description, from the mid-1920s onwards, of a much more specific and narrow ideology. And here extremes sometimes meet, for if secularism gets equated with anti-religion, the implication becomes that communalism can be countered only by exposing religion as 'superstitious' or 'irrational'. Once again, in effect, 'communal' is being collapsed into 'religious community'.

Operationally, such hostility to religion has been rare within Indian secularism, for here the term has really been synonymous with anti-communal policies and values, rather than being anti-religious or even particularly rationalist. Anti-secularist expressions however frequently make use of such an equation for its own purposes. Paradoxically, when combined with rejection of hindutva as within an influential current intellectual trend, 'communal' and 'community' once again tend to get collapsed into each other, except that then a sharp disjunction is postulated between 'modern' and 'pre-modern' communities, 'religion-as-ideology' as contrasted to a somewhat romanticised 'religion-as-faith'. The sense of outrage evoked by religious conversion, thirdly, can be greatly intensified and made to appear much more legitimate if the loss can be given a 'patriotic', or 'national' colour. This, of course, has been the special advantage enjoyed by Hindu majoritarianism,

particularly after 1947. Sangh parivar justifications of recent outrages against Christians are replete with instances of such an equation (ibid: 1999).

It needs to be noted that a very effective semantic ploy has been propagated through which it has come to be widely assumed that Hinduism is near-unique among religious traditions in being non-proselytising: conversion to other faiths therefore is a loss that cannot be recovered, and so particularly unfair. This at first sight seems to fit in well with the common sense view that one can become a Hindu by birth alone, since caste (whether in the 'varna' or the 'jati' sense) is crucial to Hinduism, and a person's caste status is hereditary. But certain tricky questions arise as soon as we enlarge the time-perspective: for example where did all the Buddhists of ancient India go? And how did Hindu icons and myths spill over into large parts of south-east Asia? More crucially, one needs to recognise that, across centuries but in accelerated manner with modernised communications, brahmanical Hindu rituals, beliefs, and caste disciplines have spread across the subcontinent and penetrated and sought to transform communities with initially very different practices and faiths.

It has somehow become conventional to describe the processes here by anodyne terms like 'Sanskritisation' or 'cultural integration', but they really amount nevertheless to what with other religious traditions would have been termed 'conversion'. There is also much historical data about the spread of specific varieties of Hindu traditions like for instance Chaitanya bhakti from central and western Bengal into Odisha and the uplands of Jharkhand. A whole battery of terms was developed from the late 19th century onwards as expansion directed towards marginal groups and tribals became more organised: 'reclamation', 'shuddhi' ('purification'), 'reconversion', 'paravartan' ('turning back". the term preferred by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad today). Common to all these labels is an insistence that all that is being at-tempted is to bring people back to their 'natural' state: which, for all the targeted groups, is always assumed to be being Hindu in a more or less sanskritised manner. This clearly shows the deployment of semantic aggression. (Sarkar, 1999: 1693)

Three major changes, roughly from the latter part of the 19th century onwards, seem particularly relevant for understanding why conversions started becoming so much more controversial. The first was the tightening of community boundaries. One example can be

cited from the census procedures which often involved the imposition of order, rather than simple recording of realities on the ground. For instance, from the amusing case in the 1911 census of a 35,000-strong community of 'Hindu-Muhammadans' in Gujarat, so termed by a Bombay census superintendent confounded by the inextricable combination of multiple practices, beliefs, and even self-definitions. The latter was pulled up sharply by his superior, census commissioner E.A Gait. Thus, Census operations necessitated the drawing of sharp distinctions, of religion, caste, language, or whatever else the administrators had decided on as worthy of being counted. Enumerated communities made for mutual competition, complaints about unfair representation in education, jobs, administration or politics, stimulated fears about being left behind in numbers games (ibid).

Secondly, colonial modernity helped to tighten community bonds but also made them more fragile. By the late 19th-early 20th century there came into existence a situation conducive for the growth of not one, but many community-identities -religious, caste, linguistic-regional, anti-colonial 'national', class, gender, in interactive yet of a conflicting relationships with each other.

Thirdly, there was a beginning of the discourse of individual rights. This was due to a direct influence of western liberal and radical ideologies, while not negligible, was no doubt confined to relatively few. Equality before the law, promised in much-cited official documents like the Queen's Proclamation of 1858, was often severely tampered by white racial privilege. But then promises simultaneously held out and broken tend to arouse sentiments, and such a dialectic came to operate, though of course in widely different and at times even contradictory ways, both with respect to attitudes towards their foreign overlords of a growing number of Indians, and lower caste (and/or class) resentments about indigenous hierarchies of privilege and exploitation (Sarkar: 1999).

Prior to around the turn of the century, Christian proselytisation among the poor, as distinct from the rare but spectacular conversion of prominent men, does not seem to have become an essential upper caste intelligentsia concern. Much of the expansion, in the 19th century as well as often later, was in outlying areas, largely untouched by mainstream

Hinduism and Islam. The element of competition and conflict entered much later, with Hindu 'reconversion' efforts (ibid: 1695).

Today, the Hindu nationalists claim that people convert to Christianity either because they have been tricked by missionaries or because they have been seduced by offers of material remuneration. By effectively linking conversion with issues of national security and cultural actualization, they argue that proselytizing is part of a conspiracy to destroy "Indian" culture and to destabilize the "Indian" polity. These objections have led to numerous protest rallies and speeches and, in some specific instances, to violent confrontations between Hindus and Christians.

The dissonance between the actions and rhetoric of the movement suggests that what is at issue is not the act of conversion itself, but rather the challenge that conversion to Christianity presents to *Hindutva*. Conversion to Christianity threatens the construction of India as a nation for Hindus. Hindu nationalists regard Christianity as a foreign religion that is seducing people away from their original faith, Hinduism. Conversion to Christianity threatens the "competitive logic of numbers" introduced by the colonial census that established the numerical division of the population by religious grouping and fueled the majoritarian impulses of the modern nation-state (Sarkar 1999). Peter van der Veer asserts that because "numbering is an intrinsic part of the modern nation-state," constructions of majority and minority groups are centrally implicated in the debates over conversion (1996: 14).

Conversion to Christianity also threatens the very essence of Hindu nationalist subjectivity, thus prompting the movement to engage in its own form of conversion, or "re-conversion." Conversion can be understood as what Nicholas Dirks calls "the project of translation" necessary to incorporate "others" into the meta-narrative of the nation. Dirks contends that conversion is "a sign of the epistemological violence implied by myriad efforts to know, domesticate, name, claim, and ultimately inhabit 'the other'". Conversion places individuals within a new epistemological universe, one that requires, as Robert Hefner claims, a "commitment to a new kind of moral authority and a new or reconceptualized social identity". *Hindutva's* attempts to counteract the actions of missionaries can be understood as the practice of conversion to "translate" both Hindus

and non-Hindus into a new kind of Hindu nationalist subject (Dirks and Hefner as cited by Menon, 2003: 71)

So the debate on conversion still continues and has become a source of controversy in the last few years especially regarding the conversion of tribal communities. During the 1990s, the Parivar focussed its attention on tribal areas where missionaries had already established educational institutions and medical facilities. For example in Dangs district of Gujarat, Shah (1999) points out that despite census statistics showing that the overall population of Christians in India was actually falling, the Christian growth in that area was very high and thus there was increasing competition between the Christian and Hindu organizations for conversion or reconversion respectively. This resulted in various clashes over tribal customs, which converts to Christianity had ceased to observe (Shah, 1999: 312-5).

Concluding Remarks

So while the Christians say that the tribals are not Hindus, the Parivar, who renamed the tribals *vanvasi* (forest dweller) rather than *adivasi* (original inhabitants), argue that they are a part of the Hindu family as they share many of the cultural and religious aspects of Hindu religion. The Parivar has adopted *ghar vapasi* programme to counteract missionary activities. But in this tussle the voice of the tribal has been lost. Today these indigenous people are fighting a battle either to live a life they are accustomed to or to get merged with rest of the country. There is a general lack of will on the part of policy makers, missionaries and the right wing forces to understand this ancient way of life as the adivasis themselves see.

The humane and personal touch of missionaries who expressed concern, in the adivasis' dialect, about the day-to-day problems of adivasis and were willing to help them influenced some to become Christians. After baptism they slowly give up certain rituals related to worship. They are advised to give up worship of the deities which they used to worship. Their participation in traditional religio-cultural celebrations has declined. But sometimes the missionaries directly attack the indigenous cultural practices, such as

marriage songs and rituals. This creates friction at village and family levels (Sarkar, 1992: 55-56).

It becomes a difficult task for an outsider to understand a way of life which is not theirs and the problem is compounded by the fact that these 'outsiders' come with preconceived notions of the adivasi way of life and with an agenda to 'civilize' their 'primitive' ways. This kind of forced intrusion affects their identity, their culture, their livelihood and the things they hold sacred. Though they have every right of choosing what they want to accept and what not to, most of the time the circumstances under which they find themselves are not of their own choice. They are under threat of losing their culture and world view.

They have been given branded different names by different camps which has served as an excuse 'sanitize' them and to burden them with an alien way of life. The adivasis are now stratified on account of the numerous interventions of the government, non-government agencies, missionaries and adivasi organisations. Lobo (2002), examining the post-Godhra riots states that personal conflicts in the villages were converted in to Hindu-Christian communal conflicts by these Hindu right wing outfits and the poor *adivasis* were systematically incited and used to loot and arson.

As Heredia puts it "tribal self-reliance has been undermined not just by the expropriation and degradation of their material resources, but further by the negation and denigration of their cultural heritage" (Heredia, 2007: 249). So, historically, the adivasis have been denied adequate space to voice their opinion and there has also been slackness on the part of the 'mainstream' in understanding their sentiments. Lobo (2002) also points out that with the growing industrialisation non-adivasis are moving into occupy adivasi land. Industries in the adivasi areas are generating skilled employment for which the adivasis do not qualify. Tribal areas have become cheap labour colonies for the non-tribals (Lobo, 2002: 4849)

And most importantly, in the process of becoming 'Hinduized' and 'Christianized', there is a danger of them losing the memories of their past. And one also needs to question if religion, be it Hinduism, Christianity or Islam, can solve the problems that these *adivasis* are currently facing.

CHAPTER IV

RELIGIOUS CONVERSION IN ODISHA: A CASE STUDY OF KANDHAMAL

Kanungo (2003) notes that the early history of modern Odisha remains relatively vague. The territories that comprise the present-day state were known under various names in different historical periods: Utkala, Kalinga, Kosala and Udra. Odisha's history was largely shaped by its topography and geography. It consists of mainly two regions: the coastal plains and the highlands. On one hand where the forests and mountains of the highlands made the region inaccessible, on the other, the river system of the coastal plains was not friendly either. Besides this, in contrast to north and central India, parts of Odisha came under 'Muslim rule' three centuries later, in 1568. Even the victorious general of Akbar reportedly did not find it a "fit subject for conquest or for schemes of human ambition". Thus, Odisha's geography and topography had a big role in protecting its indigenous cultural identity. But at the same time it also remained linked with its neighbours, absorbing a succession of cultural waves from the north and the south into its indigenous culture; Aryans and Dravidians both intermingled here with the natives. The Sadhabas of coastal Odisha who were a sea-faring community, established long-term commercial as well as cultural links with south-east Asia, particularly Indonesia (Kanungo : 2003)

Odisha has been described in the *Kapila Samhita* as the 'Holy Land' of the Hindus. But Odisha had also experienced the strong influence of both Jainism and Buddhism. The inscriptions at Khandagiri and Udayagiri reveal that Jainism thrived here much before the arrival of Buddhism. According to Jain literary sources, the king of Kalinga was a disciple of Parsavnatha (eighth century BC), the 23rd Tirthankara, and Mahavira himself had visited Kalinga. Jainism reached its pinnacle during the reign of Kharavela's (first century BC), after which it gradually died out. Buddhist literature asserts that after the Buddha's death, one of his tooth-relics was carried to the capital of Kalinga. Buddhism spread extensively in Odisha after the Kalinga War (third century BC) and remained predominant till the fifth century AD, particularly in Odra, Kalinga and Kosala, and then gradually disappeared by the 10th century AD. Saivism scored a victory over Buddhism

in the fifth century AD: an Asokan pillar was converted into a massive *shivling* at the Bhaskaresvra temple in Bhubaneswar, indicating a violent struggle between the two faiths. The *Madalapanji*, the chronicle of the Jagannath temple, records that the Ganga rulers, the great patrons of brahmanical Hinduism, persecuted the Buddhists. Along with persecuting non-Hindus, attempts were also made to assimilate them into the Hindu fold (Kanungo, 2003: 3294). Jayadeva's Gita Govinda (12th century AD) describes the Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu. Although both Buddhism and Jainism completely disappeared from Odisha, their legacy of non-violence and religious meditation deeply influenced its people.

As a result, Hinduism in Odisha had never been a monolithic discourse; rather it embodied a convergence of varied cults and sects, such as Saivism, Vaishnavism, Tantrism and Saktism, reflecting a spectacular assortment: sanskritic and non-sanskritic, all- India and regional/local, textual and popular, urban and village. The coastal region and the river valleys were a home for countless Hindu temples and monuments, all bearing witness to the splendid indigenous architectural genius. This assertive sub-region had firmly held to brahmanical traditions and the rituals of ceremonial purity. It was also home to many repugnant superstitions' and abhorrent caste prejudices for centuries; the dominant caste Hindus like the brahmanas, the karanas, and the khandayats controlled the lives of the subaltern lower castes and the untouchables (ibid: 3293-94).

As compared with the coastal plains, a fairly large *adivasi* population has been living in the forests and highland areas throughout Odisha's history. Even today, as many as 62 adivasi communities reside in the state, and make up roughly one-fourth of its population. The adivasi population is substantial in districts like Mayurbhanj (57.9 per cent), Koraput (54.3 per cent), Sundargarh (50.7 per cent), Keonjhar (44.5 per cent) and Phulbani (37.3 per cent). These adivasis have their own pantheon of gods and goddesses and their own shamanic practices. In contrast to the brahmanical vedic rituals, some adivasi communities like the khonds practised 'meriah' or human sacrifices till the mid-19th century. Hence, in Odisha the gods of brahmanism are worshipped along with the minor deities outside the brahmanical pantheon, and the great traditions coexist with the little traditions (ibid: 3293).

The Jagannath of Puri holds a distinctive position in the religio-cultural and political traditions of Odisha. Although the cult has a rather recent history, its 'ancientness' is projected since it is a major component of the process of homogenisation (ibid: 3294). Though Jagannath is acknowledged as 'Odisha's god/cult' there are some complexities and intricacies that need to be outlined. First, although Puri is the principal place of brahmanical supremacy in eastern India, Jagannath has a strong *adivasi* connection. It is widely believed that originally the savaras worshipped Jagannath as Nilamadhava in the Nilakandara (Blue Caves). The iconography also speaks of the adivasi origin of the 'trinity' - Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra. Further, the etymology of *Madalapanji* suggests its roots in the Mundari word 'mudala', which means "to establish with evidence, confront with proof." Thus, the Hinduisation of Odisha needs to be seen as a two-way route in which not only were some characteristics of Hinduism integrated into the adivasi cults, but also vice versa (ibid: 3294).

Second, the decision of Anantavarman Codaganga, a saivite, to build a temple in Puri in the middle of the 12th century for Jagannath, an incarnation of Vishnu, was based on political considerations; it was a pragmatic response to the rising tide of Vaisnavism in Odisha. Thus, from its very inception, the cult of Jagannath was conceived of as a legitimising agency for the rulers of Odisha. Eventually, Anangabhimha III dedicated the Odishan empire to Jagannath and proclaimed himself as god's 'deputy' ('rautta'). Jagannath was elevated as 'the king of the kingdom of Odisha' (Madalapanji); a similar description is found in the '*Kanchi Kaveri*', the legendary poem of Purusottama Das. As Kanungo pertinently observes, all those who ruled Odisha - the Mughals, the Marathas and the English East India Company - sought legitimacy and hegemonic control by acknowledging the supra-temporal authority of Jagannath, at least notionally (Kanungo : 2003).

It is important to discuss the significance as well as the limitations of the concepts of sanskritisation and Hinduisation while dealing with conversions. As argued, sanskritisation was a way through which low castes were able to rise, over one or two generations, to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by sanskritising their ritual and pantheon. One can agree with this as long as it accepts that such alterations were linked to some degree of upward economic movement. An additional predicament central in this formulation is that it abstracts caste

from deeper economic processes and does not see the level of violence inflicted on the adivasis and their ideas while negotiating with this process (Pati: 2001).

Given its long history this is generally glossed over. In fact, even sensitive socio-anthropological studies have sometimes categorically asserted that Hindu civilisation did not on the whole seek to convert or displace tribals, although they agree that conflicts were recurrent, and tribes were forced to move away into the 'remotest areas' - viz, the forests and mountains. Examined together these challenge the 'civilisational' claims of Hinduism. In fact, if anything the opposite seems to be the case. Thus, one witnesses a process of hegemonisation, through which brahminical Hinduism actually functions. Its exploitative content in relation to those who were incorporated and hierarchised, while being 'Hinduised', cannot be missed. Similarly, it was and still is obvious by a high degree of exclusiveness, involved in the very idea of keeping the order of varna 'clean' and 'pure', especially when it comes to those who are located as the outcastes as also sections of adivasis (Pati, 2001: 4205).

The Pre-colonial Settings:

Examining pre-colonial, and more precisely, early medieval Odisha, scholars like Bhirabi Prasad Sahu draw attention to the dynamics of the feudalisation of the area. The expressions of this process included, on one end the intermediaries and superior landlords and at the other the reduction of peasants and artisans to the place of semi-serfs. He suggests that the development of the caste system was late in Odisha and when it did, certain specificities and variations in comparison to the Indo-Gangetic plain model marked it. This was primarily because of the preponderant tribal population and the geographical differences in the region (ibid: 4205).

As a result of the land grants to brahmins and the extension of agriculture most of the tribes were converted into sudras, which converged with the process of their peasantisation. Along with this their chiefs were absorbed as kshatriyas into the varna system. This implied the absence of any firm polarisation. The classic four-fold varna system continued to remain largely notional, as in practice, the two tier-structure with the numerous intermediary occupational castes constituted the functional reality.

Consequently, one witnesses the evolution of two clearly identifiable varnas – the brahmins and the sudras. The vaishyas surfaced only occasionally in times of trade and the kshatriyas never had local roots, and were created in this period, as has been mentioned. As delineated, the rise of the kshatriyas/karanas was a feature associated with the emergence of feudalism (ibid: 4205).

Colonialism: Changes and Transformations

From the perspective of Odisha, colonialism reinforced the existing situation through various interventions but most significantly through the land settlements and monetisation that it created. One very important point was a sharpening of the caste/class polarisation which had a clear association with the agrarian interventions, irrigation, commercialisation of agriculture, and an increasing degree of monetisation. In fact, a very superficial survey of some of the available land settlement reports of the temporarily settled areas of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore, the princely states and some of the major zamindaris illustrates the rather serious fall-out of the agrarian interventions, especially the way they polarised social relations centred around caste. These had a bearing on the question of conversion since the land settlements entailed a set of complex negotiations with the adivasis (Pati: 2001).

The specificities of the context are mirrored in the way the Ranas of Jeypore wore the 'sacred thread' and believed that they had bought the right to do so from the maharaja of Jeypore. What deserves emphasis is the significance of this language of exchange that was applied to the sacred realm. It was also observed that the gonds of Sambalpur invented new legends to re-locate themselves within the framework of Hinduism, and the gond zamindars wearing the 'sacred thread' (Pati: 2001). These not only implied a degree of Hinduisation, but also a strategy to deal with the agrarian interventions. Here one can also mention the Kandhas of Ranpur (a princely state) who preferred to be identified as 'Odia Kandhas' that indicates an allied component of the process – Odiaisation. One witnesses a continued importance of the kshatriyas. After all, the colonialist needed to have 'settlements' with 'rulers'- especially the princes and the landed zamindars. Here the classic varna system was invoked to get the legitimacy for the alliances with the kshatriyas who were the 'rulers' (ibid: 4205).

Starting from the raja of Puri, who was 'a king without a kingdom', this interaction reinforced the pre-existing order of things we have already encountered, along with Odisha's colonisation. The other vital component included the relatively affluent agriculturists –including a section of the adivasis. Many from this section emerged as 'rich' peasants over the 19th century. Here one is talking about those who did well in the new 'production for the grain market' environment and claimed khandayat -the Odia variant of kshatriya-status. Khanda means a sword and khandayat means sword wielding. In fact, this caste accommodated a wide variety of the prosperous section of the adivasis as well. This implied a level of rajputisation/kshatriyaisation that converged with Hinduisation, and affected the affluent sections of the adivasis. Some of the references in the census reports offer clues to understand this process (ibid).

For example, the first census mentions the presence of 'numerous' savaras (adivasis) in the Cuttack and Puri tract. At the same time, a very superficial survey of the tribal population shows a decline between 1891 and 1941 in some parts of Odisha, although there is no serious reason to explain this. One also sees a very large increase of the khandayat population - 45.4 per cent (the largest for any caste) - between 1901 and 1931 in the Odisha division and the Odisha states. Consequently, the connection between a decline of the adivasi population and the phenomenal increase of the khandayats should be borne in mind while discussing the question of conversions and Hinduisation in Odisha. Shifting identities marked the phenomenon of conversion. For example, one witnesses some 'advanced' binjhals - a tribe in the Sambalpur region - claiming rajput status and adopting the practice of burning their dead. It hardly needs to be pointed out that the emulation related to the disposal of the dead symbolised an attempt to get incorporated into the brahminical order. Hinduisation and its associated complexities implied a stress on, among other things, vegetarianism and meant a shift in the dietary habits (Pati, 2001: 4206).

This has a special significance especially since it implied a certain degree of stability with regards to agricultural production and affluence. Thus, it was not really easy for the unsettled pariah adivasis, engaged in shifting cultivation to accept it. Besides being looked down upon by the brahminical order, the relative inaccessibility to and their lesser

dependence on the market - at least in the early years of the 19th century - meant that they had no serious desire to convert (ibid: 4206).

It is in fact quite usual to come across innumerable references to a fractured adivasi reality, which spoke of two chief categories of adivasis - the plains people and the pariah or dongariah (viz, donger means shifting cultivation) adivasis, with the colonial establishment clearly appreciative of the former. Most adivasis who converted to Hinduism, at least in the initial years, via the varna system, retained their specific social and religious customs. The brahminical order was quite comfortable with this aspect as they were 'ancient people' who had to maintain their customs. This process implied that while being integrated they were also being hierarchised. Thus, it would be, for example, difficult to talk about adivasis gaining acceptance as Brahmins. In fact the rajputisation scheme and categories like 'haliya' Brahmins have to be borne in mind while explaining the limits upto which such transgressions could be accepted. These were the most common routes through which the process of conversion seems to have been channelised. The adivasi chiefs and the affluent sections got linked to the varna order through these (ibid: 4206)

Thus, what one witnesses is their 'acceptance', with clear boundaries and hierarchisation. The Hinduised kandhas of Puri, for example, had to employ Brahmin priests. More significantly, given their position in the hierarchy of caste, they had to employ 'low brahmins' from among low caste Hindus, who were elevated as a consequence as well. This was in striking contrast to affluent non-brahmins, including telis (oilmen) who aspired for upward social mobility and were accepted as patrons of and donated to the Utkala Brahmin Samiti, established in 1899. Thus, 47 out of 217 who contributed to it in 1906 were non-brahmins. Consequently it illustrates a process where class and social position mattered (ibid: 4206).

As mentioned above, diet and social position were closely related features when it comes to the question of conversions of the adivasis. This was precisely another vital reason that kept the landless, outcastes out of this process. If anything, their position in fact got marginalised with the polarisation of the caste system. They were distinctly classified as the Other. This meant that whereas some of the adivasis were 'terrorised' to convert to Hinduism, the landless outcaste was a major threat not only to the 'purity' of the varna

system but also to the colonial system as it were. Thus whereas some of the 'animists' were 'civilised', the latter had to be 'tamed' and negotiated with as 'criminal classes'. Consequently, there appears to be a shift from the pre-colonial times, in the way the adivasis were re-located. This was the result of a very complex dialectical process, involving the varna system which seems to have opened up a space for 'integration', by incorporating a large section of the adivasis as khandayats/kshatriyas, and adivasi society itself negotiating with the new context and adopting conversion as a part of a broad survival strategy (Pati 2001).

Among many complex features, one witnesses that most of the big zamindars and especially the princes, many of whom were colonial constructs went all out to prove their association with the adivasis. This became vital to prove their ancientness. Many folktales that were invented to establish this also served the purpose of securing legitimacy and exercising power over the adivasis. The colonial officialdom was largely influenced by this 'integrative' component and found the brahminical order, especially the cult of Jagannatha, to be one of its greatest legitimisers. In fact, this was a cult, which was one of the most significant inventions associated with the princes and zamindars. There were pre-colonial efforts in this direction (ibid:2001).

Thus the process of urbanisation in most of the capitals of the princes and bigger zamindaris, recreated a Jagannatha temple, with a 'bada danda' (big street) in front of it, and the annual ratha jatra - modelled along the lines of Puri. Odisha's colonisation perfected this drive. What is significant from the point of view of the present project is the emphasis on the oral tradition that highlighted the savara (an adivasi community) origins of Jagannatha. Perhaps it formed the most vital component through which the colonial system and the internal ruling classes (princes and zamindars) negotiated with a region that had a very large adivasi population (Pati, 2001: 4206).

There were drives to build Hindu temples in parts of western Odisha. Here one can specifically refer to the temple-building project of the tahsildar Dinabandhu Patnaik. The scheme involved building a Sibamandira (temple for Shiva) in 1855 at Bisipara. This was his headquarters. In fact, it was not built only by the people of Bisipara, but by people of the Khondmals region, through bethi (forced labour). In this way, Hinduisation made

deep inroads into western Odisha. What one observes is the emergence of a system - however invisible it might have been - to direct the conversions to Hinduism. This entailed mainly two methods. The first was comparatively non-violent and long drawn, and, in this sense, a hegemonic process. Although it had pre-colonial roots, it was substantially altered over the 19th century (ibid: 4207).

The second included a set of terror campaigns of the coloniser and his privileged tenure holders in the hills. These were marked by sudden disruptions. The magnitude of this latter process is difficult to fathom unless one also keeps in mind the decimation of the adivasis, owing to the conflicts with colonialist, in the 19th century who had to start from scratch and forced to convert, or join the outcastes. What is striking is the way this process saw the relative unity of the different constituents involved with the conversion of the adivasis: the brahminical order, the internal exploiting classes and last but not the least colonialism. Equally significant is the way this process saw continuities as well as the shifts and changes, if compared to the pre-colonial context. Thus, the kshatriyaisation component seems to have continued on a much wider scale incorporating the non-pahariah adivasis into the 'order' of Hinduism, unlike in the early medieval period, where most of them were sought to be 'integrated' as shudras. In fact, the 19th century saw a toning down of this process, unlike what has been observed for early medieval Odisha (Pati: 2001).

Thus, what we see is a complex process that saw the coexistence of Hinduisation/peasantisation/ kshatriyaisation/ Odiaisation, with the colonisation of Odisha. It was largely inclusive vis-a-vis the already peasantised adivasis, or those who - with the exception of the pahariah folk - opted to work as settled agriculturists. This was in a context of major agrarian interventions and drives that saw a significant shift towards moneytisation and the growth of a market for agricultural production. The landless section was mostly from among the outcastes and the pahariah adivasis. It constituted the mass of people who worked as landless labourers or those who migrated out to far off places in search of employment - a feature that seems to have started prior to Odisha's colonisation, but which became clearly so over the 19th century (ibid: 4207).

Issues of Identity and Resistance

The mission to 'civilize' the adivasis was fraught with difficulties and there also were complexities associated with the world of those who were converted. There were question of identity and resistance which came up and the changeover was never complete. The opposition/resistance and interrogation took various forms. The most visible were the adivasi rebellions that dot Odisha in the 19th century. The period up to the mid 19th century saw major offensives taken against the hill people and here-the idea of 'civilising' the 'barbarian' seems to have made the colonial machinery resort to brute terror. The price for being 'civilised' included unpaid labour that was extracted to build the communication links, which was crucial to extend power and control the hills. This included erosion of traditional rights over forests which were a particular problem for the pahariah adivasis.

That the varna logic gripped the colonial machinery is quite clear from the way it stereotyped the kandhas as a tribe that resorted to meriah (human) sacrifice. Besides the fact that all kandhas were not associated with it, the colonial offensive overlooked many aspects, including the fact that some of the princes and zamindars were not only involved with it, but also encouraged this practice. Most importantly, it is necessary to emphasise here that the idea of a human sacrifice itself was based on a survival strategy, against a set of conditions that marginalised the world of the adivasis and sought to terrorise them to submit. Resistance was also visible in the development of popular cults like the Mahima Dharma, as a counter to Hinduisation and upper caste domination (Pati, 2001: 4207)

One should also mention here diseases like smallpox, which offer fascinating clues to understand the way adivasi society negotiated with the phenomenon of Hinduisation. Smallpox spelt doom for the kandhas of Subarnaghurry in 1860. This was identified to be a problem associated with the presence of the Paikas (an erstwhile martial caste which got increasingly involved in agriculture, and also included some who were the converted adivasis) in their 'country' since they were 'the means of getting the Sircar and causing smallpox to prevail among them'. The kandhas felt that if the paikas were expelled then they would enjoy peace and comfort. About 50 kandhas, led by Jagoo Pojaree and armed with battle axes, bows and arrows went to the village Goomahgoodah and 'shouted aloud

to murder all the paikas who hid in their houses'. We also witness the invention of the Dharma Pinnu - the smallpox goddess - by the Kuttia Kandhas to cope with the disease.

Dharma Pinnu was seen as the source of smallpox and worshipped at all agricultural festivals. Interestingly, she was identified as an Odia (Hindu) goddess living in the lap of luxury. Ceremonies were performed in her honour just before sowing in the hill clearings. The invocations at her special ceremony were made in Odia and the offerings were not the normal millet and rice beer but milk, ghee, rice and 'mohwa' liquor (ibid: 4208). This was a way through which the community regenerated itself and created social congruence. What was dubbed by others as supernatural was merely a continuation of the normal where the binary oppositions between natural and supernatural; nature and culture; literal and metaphorical were blurred and dissolved (Marglin, 1990: 114-115).

Moreover this also reflected a part of a broader survival strategy of the indigenous people to negotiate with the process of Hinduisation. What we see is the fusion of a set of highly complex strands that reflect a process of contesting the conversion drives in the hill tracts as well as attempts to get accommodated in to the varna order. What also needs to be emphasised is that the smallpox goddesses that emerged out of the complex interaction with the process of Hinduisation, occupied a rather central position. Moreover, the offering of 'mohwa' (liquor) and 'pana' (a ritualistic drink), the special invocations to her in Odia and the idea of abandoning her at a lonely spot outside the village limits illustrate two simultaneous processes - of contesting Hinduisation and those who were seen as its representatives in the hill tracts and also an attempt to negotiate and accommodate her/get accommodated within the varna order (ibid: 4208).

Christians as the 'Others'

The magnitude of conversions to Christianity was hardly felt in the region, in spite of the projections. The association of Christianity with colonialism was the most serious stumbling block and this perhaps explains why it was never seen as a serious option, although serious efforts were made in this direction and many outposts were created for the purpose. After saying this one should perhaps delineate certain complexities associated with the shift to Christianity. Like the converts to the varna order who

participated in the Hindu as well as tribal festivals, the converts to Christianity observed certain customs and beliefs that were antithetical to the basic tenets of Christianity. They participated in tribal festivals and when asked about their identity, mentioned their tribe, suppressing the Christian connection. (Pati, 2001: 4208)

Coastal Odisha came in contact with Christian missionaries towards the end of the 18th century when it became a maritime centre for European traders - English, French, Dutch, Danes and Portuguese. A Catholic church came up in Jaleswar and a Wesleyan church in Ganjam. The Serampore missionaries of Bengal translated the New Testament and a few other Christian tracts into Odia and sent a Bengali convert to Cuttack and Puri to distribute literature and preach Christianity, but with no success (Kanungo: 2003). When the British took control of Odisha from the Marathas in 1803, Lord Wellesley, the governor general, issued instructions "to employ every possible precaution to preserve the respect due to the Pagoda, and to the religious prejudices of the brahmins and the pilgrims" (as quoted by Kanungo, 2003: 3296).

The British were realistic enough to take over the 'superintendence and management' of the Puri temple and to persist with the Maratha practice of collecting the pilgrim tax. The missionaries, on the other hand, vehemently opposed the government's association with the temple and put constant pressure on it to sever its connection with idolatry. They ridiculed the pilgrimage to Jagannath as 'the greatest scourge' and deplored the gruesome acts of self-immolation and the many deaths that occurred during the car festival, citing highly exaggerated statistics. To them, Jagannath epitomised 'vice, suffering, loss of life and other evils' and the government's decision to become the 'church warden' of Hindu deities was 'unchristian'(ibid: 3296). After a long struggle, the missionaries finally succeeded; in 1856 the government severed all connections and formalised its decision to hand over the superintendence and management of the temple to the raja of Khurda.

Though the chief intention of the missionaries was to evangelise Odisha, it became a Herculean task to find a convert among the followers of Jagannath. The first mission was set up in Odisha in 1822, but it took six years to convert a native. In 1827 Erun Senapati, a Telugu-Odia weaver, was baptised; but in a real sense the first Odia convert was Gangadhar Sarangi, a brahman of Tangi in Cuttack district. Gangadhar, who was baptised in 1828, was a disciple of Sadhusundar Das, a Hindu ascetic who advocated monotheism

and anti-idolatry. Though Christianity impressed Das and he encouraged his followers to read Christian theology, he himself never wanted to be converted. However, some of his followers embraced Christianity, boosting the morale of the early missionaries (ibid: 3296).

But Odisha never experienced a large-scale conversion to Christianity. Initially, each convert had to be won individually. And contrary to conventional wisdom, most of the early converts were from the upper castes and their motive was not material gain. They converted only after a thorough reading of the Christian scriptures and comparing these with the Hindu shastras. Subsequently, the missionaries won some converts through their schools and orphanages. In later stages, they moved into the tribal areas where they had a better success rate. And here, unlike the early stages of the evangelisation movement, the decision to convert was based on many motivations, including the material (Kanungo: 2003). The missionaries confronted many obstacles in their attempt to evangelise Odisha: rigid social customs, illiteracy, unfavourable climate, lack of communication, and more importantly, the overarching spiritual influence of Jagannath.

Undaunted by these heavy odds the missionaries continued their work. They were fervently against idolatry, female infanticide and human sacrifice; they educated the illiterate; opened asylums, orphanages and hospitals for the poor, the homeless, and the sick; and served the destitute during famines. Their evangelical mission ushered in a new Odia literary movement. The Reverend A Sutton compiled an Odia-English grammar, an Odia Dictionary, translated Gita Govinda, Amarkosa, Batrish Singhasan, and edited the Odia Gazette; W C Lacey composed Odia Grammar and J Phillip authored Geography of Odisha. A number of newspapers and journals sprang up. The missionaries opened schools and hospitals in the inaccessible tribal areas. Though evangelisation was their primary objective, their philanthropic role also needs to be underlined (Kanungo: 2003).

But after independence, the role of missionaries was treated with suspicion and an enquiry regarding missionary activities was launched in Madhya Pradesh. The Niyogi Report (1956) sought to curb the increasing cases of conversion through various measures such as monitoring the entry of missionaries, limit the fundamental right of article 25 to Indian citizens only, suitable controls on conversion through illegal means, etc (Kim,

2003: 68). Though the recommendations of the report were not implemented immediately, they resurfaced in the freedom of Religion Act of Orissa.

Orissa Freedom of Religion Act (OFRA), 1967

In the years following independence, the work of Christian missionaries, who included foreigners, continued to be the target of suspicions, particularly in areas such as Odisha which had large tribal populations. The social service and charitable activities of the missionaries in the areas of healthcare and education came under a cloud insofar as these were seen linked to the objective of conversion. This became the basis of a new legislation on the issue of freedom of religion in Odisha in 1967.

The basic premise of the Orissa Freedom of Religion Act (1967) is that “Conversion in its very process involves an act of undermining another faith. This process becomes all the more objectionable when this is brought about by recourse to methods like force, fraud, material inducement and exploitation of one’s poverty, simplicity and ignorance”. So, this act, while accepting that propagation was allowed by the Constitution, placed various restrictions on the same in the very context of conversion.

This Act, the first post-1947 anti-conversion law passed in 1967. Section 3 of the Act outlawed conversion ‘by the use of force or by inducement or by any fraudulent means.’ Debating its constitutionality, OFRA was overturned in 1973 by the Odisha High Court Division Bench comprised of Justice R.N Mishra and Justice K. B Panda. The court determined that OFRA violates Article 25 of the Constitution-Right to Freedom of Religion, obstructing the rights of Christians to practice and propagate their religion and to seek conversions. The Court opined that the Parliament of India, and not the state legislature, was vested with the sole powers to enact laws on matters concerning religion. OFRA was returned in 1977 by a Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court of India, which declared the Act to be legally binding. The Bench made distinctions between ‘propagation’ and ‘conversion’. Justice A.N Ray stated ‘what Article 25(1) grants is not the right to convert another person to one’s own religion by exposition of its tenets’. They ruled that adoption of a new religion is freedom of conscience, while conversion would impinge upon the freedom of choice granted to all citizens alike. The Bench asserted that

every effort at conversion infringes on civic orderliness, damages social conscience, and produces impacts detrimental to the citizenry. The Bench further clarified that state legislatures may implement laws to ensure public stability.

The violation of the Act makes one liable for punishment that may extend to one year, with or without fine, which may be upto Rs 5000. It also prohibits the conversion of anyone under the age of 18 years. For conversions involving persons below the age of 18 years, a woman, or a person belonging to the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe, the punishment is for 2 years and a fine of upto Rs 10000. Under this Act, the offences will not be investigated by an officer below the rank of a police inspector. Each district magistrate has to maintain a list of religious organizations propagating religious faith in the district. Any person intending to convert needs to give a declaration before a first class magistrate, prior to such conversion, that he intends to do so on his own accord. The priest will have to intimate the date, time and place of the ceremony where the conversion would take place, along with the names and addresses of the persons to be converted, to the concerned district magistrate 15 days prior to the said ceremony in a prescribed form. The district magistrate has to maintain a list of conversions and enter particulars of the intimation received by him and by the 10th of each month, needs to send to the Governor, a report of intimation pertaining to such conversions. Though this law was enacted in 1967, it could not be implemented for the next 22 years due to the absence of rules to support it. In 1989, the Odisha Freedom of Religion Rules was framed. The first case registered under this Act was in 1993 when a superintendent of police booked 21 pastors in Nabrangpur for breaking the law. The SP was immediately transferred following indignation for what was termed as impudent action.

In November 2000, the Odisha government notified churches that religious conversions could not occur without the permission of the local police and district magistrate. The OFRA contains a provision requiring a monthly report from the state on the number of conversions. After a conversion has been reported to the district magistrate, the report is forwarded to the state authorities and a local police officer conducts an inquiry. The police officer can recommend in the favour or against the intended conversion and often is the sole arbitrator. If a conversion is judged to have occurred without the permission of the district magistrate or with coercion, the authorities may take penal action. But, there

were no reports of the district magistrate denying permission for any conversion during this period.

The minority communities have steadfastly opposed it, claiming that such legislation is aimed at restricting the right to propagate religion guaranteed under Article 25 of the Constitution by demanding that the people should obtain government's permission before conversion. An intractable problem persists in this context is how to determine with absolute certainty that a particular act of conversion is voluntary or not, that it is fair and not fraudulent, sincere and not contrived. It also poses the questions of what authority the State has in infringing upon an individual's choice of his religion. T.N Madan (2003) is of the opinion that the best guardian of freedom of religion, and the most effective guarantor that unfair conversions, particularly on a collective basis, shall not take place, will not be the state but civil society or the two in association.

Construction of Identities: 'Odia', 'Hindu' and 'Indian'

The Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Christian encounters in Odisha, despite occasional hostility, were never adverse. There was no large-scale conversion among Odias either to Islam or Christianity, and Muslims and Christians hardly ever appeared intimidating to Hindus in terms of their numbers or their 'otherness', since both these communities, despite their different religions, were part of the same Odia cultural traditions. Against this background, it is interesting to examine how Hindutva made its entry into present day Odisha (Kanungo 2003: 3296).

The quest for uniting the Odia-speaking areas into a single territory gained momentum in the late 19th century. The search for Odia identity found a powerful expression in Odia literature and the Odia language agitation. Two other variants of identity also emerged during this period: 'Hindu' identity and 'Indian' identity. Thus, Odisha experienced the interaction of three types of identities that developed around three forms of nationalism: Odia, Hindu and Indian. Radhanath Ray's epic *Mahajatra* and Ramashankar Ray's play '*Kanchi Kaveri*' projected a sort of vague 'Hindu' nation (ibid: 3294).

As Odisha largely had a Hindu population and since Jagannath was a powerful symbol of Odia identity, obviously, these observations blurred the line between Hindu nationalism and Odia nationalism. Even the supporters of Indian nationalism in Odisha, like Gopabandhu Das, swore by Jagannath. As Das wrote: "If the world were a tank and India a lotus in it, then the filament of that lotus would be the holy Nilacala (Puri)" (as quoted by Kanungo, 2003:3294). Gopabandhu, a devout Hindu, became president of the Hindu Mahasabha's Odisha branch in 1927. For Madhusudan Das, an ardent champion of Odia nationalism, Jagannath was not only a Hindu deity but was also a personification of the Odia nation. Das, a Christian, was twice elected president of the All India Christian Association. However, his religious faith did not come in the way of his efforts to unite the Odia-speaking tracts, with Jagannath being the pivot (Kanungo: 2003).

Thus, all the three variants of identity complemented each other and were woven around Jagannath and his cult. Consequently, Odia identity was shaped not only by the Hindu religion but also by a host of other elements, including Odisha's specific regional and cultural traditions in which Jagannath was made to play a crucial symbolic role. This identity could be harmonised with the broader 'Indian' identity as well as with the search for autonomy that saw the formation of the province. This symbolically freighted tradition has continuities even today and remains an important component of the process of political mobilisation (ibid: 3294).

Hindutva and the Jagannath Culture

For the RSS the Jagannath-Odia-Hindu-Indian inter-connection is an ideal framework for the spread of Hindutva in Odisha. It is aware of the positive implications of the pre-colonial/colonial/Odia Hindu upper caste-middle class construction of the Jagannath cult and its symbolic meaning in the religious, social, cultural and political life of the Odias. Hence, it portrays the culture of Odisha as *Jagannath Sanskruti* because this all-embracing culture transcends and dominates all other sects and little traditions. Even though many counter traditions and critiques like the Mahima Dharma did emerge, but ultimately these were absorbed into the broad fold of the Jagannath cult. Hence, the RSS realises the futility of projecting Hindutva as an alternative; it claims, rather wisely, its ideological affinity with the Jagannath culture (Kanungo: 2003).

The RSS characterises Jagannath as a '*vanavasi*' (tribal) deity and Odisha as a *vanavasi* province. It is of the view that the Odias still possess a *vanavasi* character, retaining the primitive innocence, simplicity and honesty of a tribal society. Hence, the RSS maintains to find the popular character ('lok charitra') of Odisha open to its ideology. This line of thinking is guided by the fact that it is easier to influence the bulk of the poor, illiterate, deeply religious, unassuming and non-assertive people of this economically backward province. Kanungo (2003) is of the opinion that the Odia character, if such a thing does exist, should not be seen as monolithic and unchanging. Within Odisha, it not only differs from one region to another, but also varies from one class to the other. Moreover, people's character is not fixed and immutable; it very much changes over time (Kanungo, 2003: 3297). The RSS further argues that bhakti (devotion) constitutes the core of the Jagannath culture and that the Odias are devout Hindus. As devotion to the nation is the theme of Hindutva, the RSS regards this ideology to be in consonance with Odia traditions.

However, the RSS makes a distinction between these two kinds of *bhakti* (devotion). As a senior pracharak observes, though the Odias are a deeply spiritual people, they emphasise the personal aspect of religion, and hence they concentrate on puja (worship), bhajan (devotional song), upavas (fasting), etc, for the self-realisation of god and for personal salvation. But they do not display a similar devotion to the nation (Kanungo, 2003: 3297). The most important challenge for the RSS is to channelize the devotional and spiritual energy of the Odias towards the Hindu Rashtra. Surely, bhakti constitutes the core of the Jagannath tradition, demanding the devotee's personal identification with and submergence into the Lord. The Bhaktisutra of Narada defines this as parama prema, highest love for the Lord, possessing immortality in itself, "gaining which a person becomes perfect, immortal and satisfied, attaining which a person does not desire anything, does not hate, does not exult, does not exert himself or herself (in furtherance of self-interest)"(ibid: 3297). In a similar way the RSS demands bhakti or a complete surrender to the Hindu nation.

The common sense association of religious conversion with traditions other than Hinduism has got crystallised over the last 15 years or so, but this is a process that has its roots in the past. While colonialism and its association with Christianity have, among other features, contributed to the creation of this common sense, colonial and post-

colonial communal politics, and more recently, Hindu fundamentalism, have sustained it. Here we should mention the stereotypical image that one encounters in parts of India, more specifically urban/ coastal Odisha today (Pati, 2001: 4204).

Thus, theoretically religious conversion seems to be located around a rather flawed logic. Particularly in the case of India, conversion has to be to Christianity or Islam and on some occasions to Buddhism, but very rarely to Hinduism and this impression coexists with an understanding that Hindus can be only born as Hindus. Interestingly, re-conversion to Hinduism- or 'shuddhi' as it is located since the 19th century is easily acceptable to most scholars. The unquestioned contradiction is that whereas such a re-conversion is widely accepted, the concept of conversion to Hinduism is considered totally unacceptable. In contemporary India, one witnesses a lot of fan-fare and media reports associated with adivasis when they reconvert. Here the fact that perhaps they were never Hindus to begin with seems to be always lost sight of. After all, can we locate adivasis as those who are 'born as Hindus'?

Nevertheless there seems to be a logic that accepts their re-conversion to Hinduism, without doubting their original Hindu identity. Put in another way, their Hindu identity is taken for granted, which makes re-conversion perfectly possible, acceptable and if need be, justifiable. One finds in all this a set of contradictions which homogenises all sections of adivasis and outcastes as Hindus. Whereas for the adivasis and outcastes it involves their integration 'into the varna order, can the latter be actually seen as Hindus, while being simultaneously located as the outcaste Other? More importantly, it needs to be emphasised that this process involves establishing power over and exploiting both the adivasis and the outcastes. Thus, from the point of view of the present project, the logic of conversions to Hinduism is based on the idea of questioning and interrogating the way conversion has been located (Pati, 2001: 4204).

Pati (2000) notes that when slogans (in Odia) like 'bideshi padre hatao - desha banchao' (remove the foreign padre - save the nation) appeared on the walls of a few buildings of western Odisha in the 1980s they were not taken seriously. In a way this hardly had any meaning for the vast masses of the people in this region, caught between many real problems related to mere survival. The situation has indeed got altered over the last two decades in Odisha, with a level of unprecedented homogenisation and religious

polarisation leading many to believe that their very survival is threatened by the presence of the Christians and the Muslims. It is indeed unfortunate that fantasies and communalised perceptions seem to, at least superficially, mask the real world of poverty, hunger, unemployment. This is indeed a cruel joke if one goes by the fact that we are talking about a state where more than 55 per cent of the people and 89 per cent of families live below the poverty line (Pati, 2000: 1516).

Odisha being one of the poorest states with a sizeable population of scheduled tribes, has witnessed communal conflagrations in the tribal areas since 1996, the most notorious being the burning of Graham Staines and his two sons by Bajrang Dal activists in 1999. However, the violence that began in the Kandhamal district on the eve of Christmas 2007 was by far the most well-planned attack against Christians. After the killing of Laxmanananda Saraswati on 23 August 2008, a Hindutva-led pogrom against Dalit Christians started in the Kandhamal district which had far reaching repercussions and raised a lot of questions.

Formation of Kandhamal

When the new province of Odisha was formed in 1936, and Ganjam (which was then part of the Madras presidency) merged with Odisha, Kandhamal became a sub-division of Ganjam. After the amalgamation of the princely states with Odisha in January 1948, Boudh and Kandhamal constituted the new district of Phulbani, with its headquarters in Phulbani town. In June 1994, Boudh became a separate district and Phulbani with two sub-divisions, Kandhamal and Baliguda, was renamed Kandhamal.

Till the colonial period, the social history of Khondmals (the Kandhamal subdivision of the present Kandhamal district) is hardly known except for some sketchy references here and there. During the process of the *Meriah* suppression, the British annexed Kandhamal on 15 February 1855 as part of the Feudatory State of Boudh. "It is noteworthy that the maps prepared under the directions of the Surveyor General of India shows that even up to the year 1903 there was no line of demarcation between Boudh and Khondmals. The name of Khondmals does not even find a place on that map. It is only later that the southern hill tracts of Boudh have been designated as Khondamals by Government"

(Completion Report of the Baudh Settlement of 1907 quoted in Boudh- Khondmals District Gazetteers 1983). After this conquest, the British Government appointed a Tahsildar, Dinabandhu Pattanaik, to administer the tract under the charge of Superintendent of Tributary Mahals. In 1891, it became a sub-division under the Angul district and continued to remain under it till 1936 (PUCL Report, 2009 : 19-20)

Presently, in Kandhamal, more than 30 percent people are landless and 75 percent live below the poverty line. Kandhamal is ranked 29 among the 30 districts of Odisha in terms of the Human Development Index and has the highest Infant Mortality Rate at 169 per thousand (State Human Development Report prepared by the UNDP). Female literacy rate among the Scheduled Castes is 40.3 percent and among the Scheduled Tribes is 23.4 percent (PUCL Report, 2009: 2). Demographically, Kandhamal is a tribal majority district. According to the 2001 census, tribals constitute 52.7%. Among the tribes, Kandhos are numerically superior though there are Gonds and Saoras. Dalits account for 16.9% of the total population of which Panas form the majority (ibid: 20).

Kandha Tribals

The Kandhas of Kandhamal appear a strange combination of contrasting characteristics. They are generally docile but once provoked they turn extremely violent and uncontrollable in their belligerence. For over 50 years, they fought the British troops. Large tracts of Odisha came under British occupation in 1803 but thanks to the guerrilla warfare by the Kandhas, Phulbani (as Kandhamal was then known as) was amalgamated only in 1848. Ghumsur was a Hindu kingdom in Odisha, and its king paid a large tribute to the East India Company. In 1930s, he was unable to pay it and as a result the British sent over an army to take over his kingdom. The king and his family escaped to the mountains where the Kandhas protected him. When the British pursued him there, they were attacked by the Kandhas. In retaliation, the British burnt down their villages till they submitted to the British rule (Padel, 1995: 8).

During this war the British came to know about the human sacrifice called 'Meriah' which the Kandhas became infamous for. So the British began to take the *meriahs* (the people sacrificed). The British demand to give up the *meriahs* became symbolic to both

the Kandhas and the British of a demand to accept the British rule (ibid: 9). Missionaries began their work with some of the *meriah* children taken from the Kandha villages. They set up a residential mission in the Kandha hills in 1900s. Initially, a few Kandhas converted to Christianity but especially after 1950s, they began converting to various denominations of Christianity as it was no longer identified with the Government and offered a defense against Hindu exploitation.

They have always resisted any interference with their traditions and culture, often with violence. But there is one aspect of their tribal character that cannot be overlooked for it has been their bane: they are extremely credulous and therefore can be manipulated and used by people they trust. Feudal chiefs used the Kandhas against the British Raj (the Kandha Rebellion) for nearly 50 years in the first half of the 19th century. The Kandha rebellion was suppressed mercilessly by the British rulers who stopped the practice of human sacrifice or Meriah (Padel: 1995)

Kandhas and Panas: An Equation Gone Wrong

The Dalit Panas who had migrated to the Kandha territory in the 19th century were treated as serfs by the local Kandhas but the equations changed during and after the British rule. L.S.S. O'Malley, a British official in his Bengal District Gazetteer, published in 1908, wrote the Panas were the serfs of the Khondhs; they worked on their farms, wove cloth for them, in return for which they obtained a small area of land, grain for food and all their marriage expenses; they also used to procure victims for the Meriah sacrifices. Macpherson, the British officer in charge of 'Meriah' suppression in Kandhamal in 1865 wrote "Their serfdom was so well recognised that if a Pan left his master to work for another, it caused serious dissensions among the Khond community. To this day, there is a settlement of Pans – a kind of Ghetto attached to every large Khond village, where they weave the cloth the Khonds require and work as farm labourers" (PUCL Report: 29).

Gradually, this patron-client relationship witnessed a slow reversal of roles. The Kandha tribals were exempt from paying land revenue under the British rule and the non-tribals migrated from the plains to take advantage of this loophole. The Panas were outgoing and

availed all material and political gains while the Kandhas confined themselves to the hills. Soon, the "cunning" Panas started dominating the credulous Kandhas.

Land-Grabbing by Panas

During the British rule, various administrative positions were occupied by upper-caste Hindus in Kandhamal. After establishing a foothold in the area, the upper-caste 'babus' started operating themselves or through relatives, as moneylenders and traders. The Kandha tribals cultivated most of the land in the district until the British land laws, which recognised only individual land ownership, converted all the community-owned land into state property. Thus, the tribals became encroachers on their own land. This gave an opportunity to the Dalit Panas, who used to be the agents of moneylenders, to grab tribal land by fraudulent means. Moreover, the Panas were in friendly terms with the British and were rewarded with the 'salt licence' while the tribals maintained a safe distance from the alien rulers¹.

Panas' Demand for ST Status

Since the 80s the Christian Panas have been keen on getting the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status because that would help converted Dalit Christians enjoy a number privileges and concessions which they lose once they become Christians. This idea was mooted way back in 1981 and managed to get the sanction of the President of India when Mr K.R Narayanan was occupying the chair. Although it was not accepted by the state government, allegations that hundreds of Dalit Christians from Kandhamal used fake ST certificates to get jobs in the government and corporate sectors kept on mounting.

The agitation for a ST status grew intense in 2007 when Christians among the Pana community joined the movement. They knew there was a constitutional bar against accessing their old SC privileges. They wanted to be enlisted under the ST category because the ST status of tribals remains unchanged irrespective of their religion.

¹ http://www.jesaonline.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=39:kandhamal-social-issues-communalized&Itemid=1

The Kandha tribals felt threatened that they would lose their special rights over the tribal land and jobs once the 'clever' Dalit Panas were given ST status.²

This added more bitterness to a long-standing ethnic conflict between the two, thus providing a great opportunity to third parties and vested interest groups to exploit the situation.

Arrival of Christian Missionaries

Christian missionary activity in Kandhamal dates back to 1860s when two missionaries were sent from England to preach the Gospel. After the British conquest, Baptist missionaries started their activities in Kandhamal with Russelkonda (now Bhanjanagar) in the neighbouring district of Ganjam as their base. These missionaries are said to have been the pioneers in setting up modern centres of education and public health in the highly backward and then inhospitable Kandhamal region. They laid the foundation of the first ever church in Kandhamal in 1920. In the next two decades, missionary activity had extended to Baliguda sub-division and by 1976, this hilly district could boast of nearly 300 churches. The missionaries established schools and provided advanced medical facilities. The District Gazetteer in 1983 noted that the missionary schools and hospitals not only catered to the Christians but also non-Christians (Padel: 1995).

During the colonial era, a sizeable number of Dalits in G Udaygiri, Raikia and Tikabali areas embraced Christianity. But in the post-Independence period, Christianity spread to predominantly tribal areas like Kotagarh, Tumudibandh and Daringibadi under the Baliguda sub-division where tribals adopted the faith in large numbers. This led to frictions within the tribal community which had so far maintained a certain distance from the 'alien religion'.

The Kandhas viewed missionaries as part of the foreign power that once ruled them. Besides, they had their own age-old animist practices and did not like the manner in which the missionaries taunted their religious beliefs and *Penus* (Gods). Only a very few of them embraced Christianity. But for Panas, even in the tribal set-up, the tag of

² http://www.jesaonline.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=39:kandhamal-social-issues-communalized&Itemid=1

untouchability haunted them and they were socially isolated. On the other hand, the Christian missionaries seemed to offer both social security and a sense of identity to their existence. During colonial rule, it was the Dalit community that was attracted to Christianity more than any other community in South Odisha.

A contrast between how missionaries saw themselves and how they saw those they came to convert is thus at the basis of their thinking. If they idealized their own sufferings and benevolence, their image of various groups of 'others' is basically a negative stereotype. This dualistic outlook is closely related to the theme of self-sacrifice: missionaries 'gave their lives' to save the 'savage', 'ignorant' Konds (Padel 1995: 206).

Missionaries often contrasted tribals with Hindus, and considered them more open to conversion. The Konds (Kandha) too were at first thought of as 'ripe material' for conversion on the grounds that they were 'clean slates' having no religion of their own. For them the Kond religion consisted of ignorance and the free expression of savage passions. Like the administrators, missionaries saw Kond society in terms of wilderness, disorder and anarchy. They saw Konds as fundamentally ignorant – of 'medical facts' as well as of Christian truths. Yet early missionaries were remarkably ignorant of Kond religion, speaking of it in terms of 'demon worship', and evil human passions given free rein (Padel 1995: 210-12).

Diffusion of Christian Knowledge

Schools and hospitals were central to the way missionaries established a hold over the Konds. These seemingly secular institutions won missionaries great support from the Government, as well as the church goes back home. They embodied the secular idea of 'saving' and 'conferring' benefits by helping natives to 'advance' at material level. They were also supposed to be more effective than straightforward preaching in beginning the process of 'conquering minds'. For the people who had never encountered them before, schools and hospitals, represented a novel, mysterious forms of authority and power (ibid: 218).

Schools which were supposed to broaden children's horizons, opening their minds to knowledge of the world and rational thinking became institutions which invalidated Kond (Kandha) knowledge. Here science complemented the Christian doctrine. The first Konds under missionary influence were the *meriah* children sent to the orphanages from 1836. The idea was to use Mission-educated *meriah* converts as the first evangelists to the Konds (ibid: 219). Through schools, missionaries introduced a system of authority quite alien to tribal culture-a more thorough-going version of the submissiveness and obedience which administrators demanded from Kond elders. The idea that tribal societies might have their own system of education, of a much less authoritarian nature than school education, and their own forms of knowledge did not enter the missionaries' horizon. (ibid: 224-25).

Many schoolteachers and health workers carry on the missionary role today when they approach *adivasis* with the attitude that their traditional religion and knowledge are based on 'superstitions' and 'ignorance' and that they should exchange their self sufficiency for dependence on outside 'experts' (ibid: 228). Thus, by being identified as superstitious, overcoming resistance by any means was justified (Marglin 1990: 105).

So the schools and hospitals, orphanages and boarding schools were ideal places which provided a captive audience. Fear was the first emotions which the missionaries sought to arouse and they preached, and the fear of damnation was the first stage towards Konds' conversion. Later among converts, fear of rebuke by Church authorities, and ultimately fear of excommunication, served to maintain discipline, and keep them on the 'straight and narrow path' to salvation (Padel, 1995: 231).

Orphanages and schools separated Kond (Kandha) children from their communities in many ways. Conversion to Christianity carried this much further dividing a village with a host of values and symbols. The missionary Church established a system of authority which contradicted and differed fundamentally from traditional Kond (Kandha) authority. They thus created new kind community superimposed on the old village and clan based community (Padel 1995: 233-35).

Allegations of large scale conversion of the tribals by Christian missionaries and a view that it could lead to undue social tension, led to the enactment of the Orissa Freedom of

Religion Act (OFRA) in 1967 by the then Swatantra Jana Congress government in the state.

Faceoff: Christian Missionaries and Hindu Fanatics

The Christian missionaries, aware of the influence that Panas wield over the Kandhas first befriended the Panas with the hope that they would in turn help convert Kandhas in large numbers. Gradually, over the years, the tribal Kandhas who did not form part of the institutionalised Hindu religion began adopting Christianity. But their number was limited to a few hundreds, to start with. The majority of Kandhas refused to embrace Christianity and identified themselves more with the dominant Hindu religion (Padel 1995).

The Brahmanisation of tribal people across Odisha had begun since the 11th century AD as part of the effort to bring the huge tribal population to the Hindu fold. By 12th century AD, the Jagannath cult had taken roots and interestingly Lord Jagannath, the presiding deity of Odisha, has all along been described as a tribal God (Pati 2001). The names of people – both tribal and non-tribal – in Kandhamal is a strong evidence of how Brahmanical influences had not left this area untouched.

The fact that more and more people in Kandhamal were joining the Christian order upset the Hindutva forces. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) created the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in 1966 to work among weaker and deprived sections and create a Hindu consciousness among them.

As part of the ‘spread Hindutva campaign’, the VHP deputed Swami Laxmanananda, a firebrand Hindu militant to Kandhamal to put a halt to missionary activities. The Swami set up an Ashram in Chakapad in 1967-68. This ashram soon became the centre of the anti-Christian hate campaign. Laxmanananda chose to concentrate on the Kandhas who constituted an overwhelming 52 % of the district's population and kept on telling them that they are intrinsically Hindus (Chatterji, 2009:85). Jagannath cult was used as the surest temptation to entice them.

Laxmanananda came to Phulbani (now Kandhamal) in 1969 and set up base at Chakapada with a twofold objective: Hinduising the adivasis and countering the proselytising activities of the Christian missionaries. Saraswati concentrated on the adivasis, primarily the kandhas, constituting more than half of Kandhamal's population, in order to bring them closer to Hindutva. Claiming that "vanavasis are Hindus" he systematically introduced *satsangs* and yagyas, Hindu gods and goddesses, Hindu religious scriptures and mode of worship, and organised mega- religious congregations (ashtaprahara namayagyas') attracting and mobilising the kandhas in a big way. Laxmanananda opened schools, colleges, hostels for the adivasi boys and girls; the Sangh parivar trained them ideologically and created a pool of permanent cadre. Though Hinduisation did not offer any substantive socio- economic empowerment to the poor adivasis, the VHP's "packaged Hinduism" gave them a sort of religious and cultural gratification; in an otherwise hopeless existential world, it perhaps generated some hopes under a larger Hindu identity (Kanungo: 2008, Chatterji: 2009). Besides, Laxmanananda's demonisation of the Christian panas, the traditional rivals of "Hindu" kandhas, as the "other" provided them with a purpose to be part of Hindutva. Once the process of Hinduisation picked up momentum, Laxmanananda took up reconversion (ghar wapsi') of the Christian converts back to Hinduism (Kanungo, 2008: 17).

Laxmanananda's agenda had various implications: firstly, by throwing up an alternate welfare system it challenged Christian missionaries who had earlier monopolised education and healthcare services in the non-state sectors, compelling them to be more competitive in order to retain their influence. Secondly, aggressive Hinduisation and militant "reconversion" propelled them to reorient their proselytisation discourse and strategy. New Christian denominations entered, more churches were opened; energetic evangelical groups mushroomed leaving the "laid back" Catholic church behind. Thus a quiet Kandhamal became a site of competing religiosity. Thirdly, militant Hinduisation deeply divided adivasis and dalits on communal lines. Laxmanananda successfully pitched "Hindu" kandhas against Christian panas (Kanungo, 2008: 17).

Kandha-Pana Ethnic Divide

The kandha-pana ethnic divide is not new. Historically, kandhas, the original inhabitants of Kandhamal, due to their control over land, perceived themselves as 'rajas' (kings) and the migrant landless panas from the plains as their 'prajas' (subjects). This sense of superiority was extended to the social and cultural spheres as well. However, colonial interchanged this situation by introducing new land relations and depriving the kandhas of their traditional rights over the forest land. Moreover, refusal by the kandhas to directly deal with the outside world, gave an opportunity to the panas, both material and political. Though the kandhas used the panas as "middle men", they nonetheless despised this role and their literature depicted panas as "liars", "cheats" and "hypocrites". Perhaps, this resentment was partly due to the relative success of some panas, who made gains in getting petty jobs, undertaking small trade, and even acquiring land under the colonial rule (Kanungo : 2008).

Thus, for the kandhas, the panas became exploiters and land snatchers. In the post-independence period this got further crystallised with the observation that the panas, with the help of the state as well as the church, have been cornering the maximum benefits of constitutional reservation due to their educational and economic advantage. This perception is a little misplaced as a large majority of the panas are poor and moreover, being dalit Christians, they are constitutionally deprived of the benefits of reservation. The kandhas, however, contend that the panas conceal their Christian identity and even claim to be scheduled tribes (ST) or Hindu scheduled castes (SC) by producing fake certificates. The panas, they fear, are out to dominate them economically, politically and culturally (ibid).

A small section of the panas have benefitted from the education imparted by the state and the church and have entered into the bureaucracy and politics thereby acquiring visibility and prominence in an otherwise poor district. Moreover, this elite, though mainly self-serving, intermittently takes up the issues of the community and does not shy away from showing off its influence. In the process, it has become a kind of role model for the poor panas, arousing their consciousness, enhancing their aspirations, and giving them a sense of empowerment. The emergence of the panas as an assertive community has become an

eyesore to the upper caste Hindus, not only in Kandhamal but also in other parts of Odisha (ibid).

Thus, stereotypes of the pana as "betrayer", "cunning", "deceitful", "exploiter", etc, has entered into the caste discourses in Odisha. Upper caste Hindus find it hard to digest the growing assertion of the panas, who were once untouchable and at the bottom of the social ladder. The upper and middle caste Hindus and the Sangh parivar leaders, both being outsiders in the district, enjoy a symbiotic relationship. While most of the caste Hindus like brahmins and kumutis have migrated from the neighbouring districts of Ganjam and Gajapati as government servants and traders, Laxmanananda and many of his close associates came from outside as well. Both see the assertive panas as a threat to their domination; they would prefer a "docile" kandha to a "defiant" pana any day; it is not really the latter's religion so much, as his informed consciousness. However, religion here becomes an additional stick to beat the dalit panas. Hence, the Sangh parivar, in collaboration with the upper caste elite and middle caste petty bourgeoisie, has been mobilising kandhas as Hindus against panas who are dalit Christians by giving it a communal colour, thereby widening the ethnic cleavage further (Kanungo, 2008:17).

The violence was not confined only to Kandhamal; it spread to other parts of Odisha as well. Christian communities and their institutions were attacked in Gajapati, Koraput, Bargarh, Sambalpur, Kalahandi, Rayagada, Sundargarh, Khurdha and Balasore districts. Ultimately, all this human loss and suffering become cold government statistics: 39 deaths, 3 missing, 415 villages affected, 3,776 houses and 195 churches and prayer houses damaged and 25,177 people in relief camps (PUCL Report, 2009: 8-9).

Concluding Remarks

Thus, we see that though the kandhas and panas have had a long history of living together (Chatterji, 2009) this arrangement was fraught with difference and conflicts. Poverty, dispossession, land alienation are some of the important problems being faced by both of the socially disadvantaged groups. Coupled with these problems is the limited access to scarce resources. So the inconveniences faced by the two groups are multifarious. Accompanied by a change in material conditions there were also changes in identity and religious conversion, instead of being a liberating factor, became constraining where the

kandhas and panas turned out to be just pawns in the larger picture of politics. Here religious conversion does not only remain as an individual, private and religious issue but is also related to matters of development and modernity and the prospect of losing their culture, symbols and myths.

Within the recently politicized circumstances in Odisha, the adivasis refuse to identify themselves as Hindus. Even though they are shaped in proximity to cultural and patriarchal structures of the Hindu society, dissenting groups distinguish themselves as being outside the caste structure and Hindu religion. There are distinctions even in the social treatment of 'Hindu' and 'Christian' adivasis, the latter relatively more discriminated against. In May 2006, at a convention attended by 50000 Adivasis, the Bisu Sendra Tribal Council, serving tribal communities in Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha were determined to ban Hindu customs and rituals, representations and priests from Adivasi spiritual and religious ceremonies (Chatterji, 2009: 96).

But, there are also inherent inequities of caste that are reproduced through the Church. According to a Pastor from Khordha district, Christianity is also stratified and filled with hierarchy and inequity and many times the hierarchy of the caste system is mixed with Christianity. So conversion, as resistance, also produces the very dominance it seeks to overcome as these legacies of oppression live internally in the individuals and communities and pervade institutional realities (ibid: 96).

Pati (2003) notes that the phenomenon of identifying the adivasis as Hindus developed over the late colonial period and this was considerably reinforced after Independence by contemporary majoritarian/fascist politics. This affects some marginal sections of the Odia society, like the adivasis and has led to clashes between them and the so called outcastes. He gives an example from the 1990s when the Panas tried to enter a *Shiva* temple which upset the Kandhas, thus leading to bitter clashes. This struggle over a Hindu place of worship, according to him, is a new and disturbing trend among marginal communities which mask deeper contradictions. There seems to have been an unprecedented level of homogenisation and religious polarisation leading many to believe that their survival is threatened by the presence of the 'Other'.

As Heredia observes when a person converts out of one community to another, which is perceived as an adversary, it is bound to cause resentment in the group that one leaves (Heredia, 2007: 296). Since social identities are created with regard to a certain group, identity change of a significant number of people is bound to give rise to a sense of unease as such identity changes can upset a carefully balanced status quo (ibid, 305). Viswanathan makes a very pertinent remark in this context. She says “Rethinking conversion in a modern, pluralistic world requires one to reclaim the language in which one can speak about conversion, not as violence but rather as movement and fluidity” (Viswanathan, 2001: xv).

Chapter V

Conclusion

On one hand, religious conversion can be viewed as an unavoidable stumbling block for any desire of religious harmony, for any hope of religious understanding, both of which are important to contain a probable divisive diversity. On the other hand religious extremism leaves little space for a middle ground of understanding and common sense. However, it is in this middle ground and sensitized space that any possibility of useful exchange must be positioned (Heredia: 2007).

The closer a society is tied on to the existing status quo in terms of binding relationships between religious and ethnic groups among members, within and across these, the most affected it will be when there is a change of identity or allegiance that upsets the prevailing structures of the social system. Consequently, religious conversions are more opposed in hierarchical and closed societies than in more egalitarian and open ones.

In today's context of minority bashing and anti-conversion laws, of majoritarian politics and minority vote banks, the issues implied get more volatile every day. By those opposing it, conversion has been perceived as subverse, as atrocity. Those promoting conversions regard it as a protest against oppression, as an aspiration for betterment, spiritual and otherwise. For the converts themselves, conversion is frequently more complex and mixed than they are aware of. It can be a protest against repression, a quest for liberation, for a new identity, an affirmation of human dignity, etc. For the more critical seekers, it becomes a two way interrogation of both traditions- old and new. But choosing to convert out of a compelling fear, be it physical or psychological, negates freedom (Heredia 2007).

All pluralism in society is eventually founded on the polarity between the "self" and the "other" among different persons and diverse groups. The "other" cannot simply be wished away, but always poses a question to the "self", one that will not just go away, and when the other is different the question can be threatening. Moreover, it is important that this

encounter between groups, between the self and the other, ego and alter, be mediated by a third entity; hence the need to extend the dyad to a triad (ibid).

In the Indian scenario the most significant third in the triad is the State. This is the foundation for collective rights with particular consideration for the more vulnerable segments of our society, such as linguistic and religious minorities and socially and economically backward classes. So far as the State is concerned, to presuppose that marginalized persons and groups in a society are unable to make religious choices for themselves or to resist and subvert such impositions suggests paternalism on its part, which is hardly fitting with its serious democratic aspirations. Imposing restrictions on would-be converts which they do not seek shows little confidence in them.

It is necessary to place tribal religious conversion in a context of their aspiration for change, without an alienation from their past. They have been deprived from the benefits of development and relegated to the bottom of the social hierarchy. This has isolated them, negating their identity and dignity and also assimilated them 'with a forced division of labour' into a dysfunctional social system (Heredia, 2007: 250).

Identities that are defined negatively against others in terms of "what one is not," will have a propensity to be exclusive and more dismissive of others. This creates in-groups and out-groups, stereotypes and scapegoats. Those affirmed positively from others in defining "who one is", will tend to be inclusive and not so disregarding of others. This allows for openness and receptivity. Exclusive identities lay emphasis on differences and set up oppositions and polarities with the "other". Inclusive identities are inclined to affirm similarities and complementarities with the "other". These make for tolerance and flexibility. Thus, identifying with one's linguistic or religious community need not mean hostility to other languages and religions. Yet when used thus, language and religion have been among the most effective markers to divide a society into "them" and "us".

Identity and dignity are intimately connected. Identity answers to, "who am I?"; dignity to, "what respect am I due?". The affirmation or the negation of one carries over to the other. The right to identity must include the right to dignity. One's identity is never developed in seclusion but in interaction with significant others. However, this is never an entirely passive process. One discovers himself/herself, his/her horizon of meaning and

value, with and through others. "Who I am" is always echoed off, and reflected through others. "What I am due" is always in a social context mediated by them. The rejection of acknowledgment and confirmation amounts to a negation of one's human identity (Heredia, 2007: 107). As is it with individuals so is it with groups. The individual is affirmed, or negated in the group, as the group is in society. At the individual level, this negotiation is basically through interpersonal interaction; at the social level it is also through myth and symbol, values and norms, collective memories and popular history (Kakar 1993: 50).

Collective action is resorted to in order to rectify individual insecurities. The group cohesion then becomes a replacement for lost attachments, a support to mend old injuries. Such collective remedies to individual ordeal can easily become totalising and aggressive. Confirmed in their self-righteousness, leaders manipulate and mobilise groups, ignoring the collective dignity of other groups as well as the individual dignity of their members. Thus in any social breakdown, it is easy to see why extremist responses come into prominence. This construction of the sense of self in the context of a hostile other is necessarily a function of the needs of the insecure individual and the group. What is unconsciously disowned and rejected in ourselves, is projected on and demonised in the other. What is desirable in the other is denied and attributed to oneself (Heredia, 2007: 108-109).

So too a group's identity is never constructed entirely from within the group but always in an engagement with its environment, both natural and social. Thus the significance of dialogue with other groups and communities that makes group identity a dynamic rather than a static process. Indeed, because group identity is always in process, it can be reinvented, reshaped, reconstructed anew by each generation (Heredia: 2007). Yet there is always the possibility, and depending on the power relationship involved, the probability of a group being engulfed and assimilated into its social environment to the point that it loses its distinctiveness, its identity.

In India, there have been conversions supported by political regimes and at other times it has worked as a form of resistance against particular social and political regimes. India has experienced both mass and individual conversions as well as conversions which took place under compulsion and those which were a result of religious dialogue (Robinson

and Clarke, 2003: 13-14). According to Robinson and Clarke (2003) mass conversions of Dalits, the so called 'low' castes, and some *adivasi* communities during the period of British colonial rule can be attributed , to some extent as an effort to deal the various dislocations that was being experienced by the different groups as a result of the radical socio-economic shifts brought about by colonialism. When people converted to Christianity, they adapted the new religion to their needs rather than adapting themselves to it. Conversion took place only when Christianity was able to fit into the people's pre-existing value systems (Kim, 2003:3). As it has already been mentioned, there were different missionary styles which were emphasised for the purpose of conversion and conversion was, sometimes, a dialogue between Hinduism and Christianity as exemplified by the cases of Krishna Pillai and Henri Le Saux (Visvanathan: 1993).

So, it needs to be questioned that should the boundaries between religious communities be porous or closed? Should we be tolerant about religious differences and have space for dialogue and interaction or force homogeneity and uniformity on others? When religious conversions are arranged and have the support of political and economic power, can they really be called religious?

Conversion as a process of critique and interrogation can be pursued in a context of conflict or co-operation. Tolerance is the critical divide between the two. In strained circumstances, tolerance needs dialogue to be sustainable. Anthony Giddens indicates four possible ways of dealing with a clash of values: through geographic segregation, active exit, positive dialogue and finally force or violence. The first two are not possible in today's globalizing world. Force and violence are hardly viable as means of such violence have escalated to impossible levels of horror and terror. This leaves us with dialogue and a means to both resolve and celebrate difference (Giddens as cited by Heredia, 2007: 344).

Conversion in this discourse involves a change or even a rejection of allegiance to the old socio-cultural tradition and consequently to the group or community identified with it, and a transfer of this allegiance to a new socio-cultural tradition or even the creation of a new one. Obviously this further implies a threat to the old tradition and the collective identity that went with it. Not all conversions necessarily imply socio-cultural change. Often there is cultural continuity after the conversion. But more often than not there are

certain disruptions (Heredia, 2004: 4545). The Hindu nationalist movement in India had grown steadily throughout the 1980s due to a highly successful strategy of cultural mobilisation of Hindus against the alleged threat posed by conversion to 'alien religions'. Hindu nationalism has arisen within a 'broader realm of... public culture' (ibid) rather than in either the political system or the religious field more narrowly defined, so that the nationalists' objective is to transform this culture into one decisively shaped by their ideology of Hindutva ('Hindu-ness').

In our world today plurality is an inescapable reality, whether cultural or political, ideological or religious, or otherwise. The complexity of the modern world cannot be restricted in any single world view, nor can a dominant one be imposed in a free and open society. Hence "pluralism" as an ideological response that addresses this plurality with democratic equality and freedom of conscience must be a necessary concomitant of our coping with this diversity. Thus it is necessary to value diversity as something potentially enriching and even uniting at a higher level of union. Such an enriching "communion" must inspire us not just to a unity in diversity, that accepts and respects differences, but rather to a diversity in unity, that appreciates and celebrates them (Kothari as cited by Heredia, 2004: 4546).

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