



Religious Conversion in Kandhamal District

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Kandhamal district came into being on 1st January 1994 on separation of Boudh Sub-division as a separate district from Boudh-Kandhamals, popularly known as Phulbani district. The word Kandhamal fuses two words i.e. *Kandha* and *Mal*. The word *Kandh* depicts a tribe of Odisha which is variously written as *Kond*, *Khond*, *Kandha* etc. in various sources and *mal* means a garland or a series, of course, of hills in the Eastern Ghats. *Kandhas*- a tribe that has so many sub-tribes or groups and use different languages or variations of a language centred around their locality. The *Kandhas* of Kandhamal are broadly grouped under *Maliah Kandhas*, *Kutia Kandhas* and *Desia Kandhas* and prominently speak Kui language. Hence, they identify themselves as “*Kui loku*”. Based on the religions professed by people, the Hindus are majority followed by Christians and other religions. Before touching the issue of religious conversion i.e. transmigration of people from one religion to another, a bird’s eye view may be given to the practices followed by people of this locality previously.

Walking down the culture of people, they worshipped their own array of Gods and Goddesses with a distinct procedure and rituals. *Kandhas* worshipped *Burapenu*, *Tana Penu*, *Turkipenu*, *Lohapenu* and many others along

with sacred groves, hills, sources of water and their ancestors. Sacrifice of fowl and animals was the main feature of their practice. Gods were worshipped to keep them free from wild animals and diseases, to bring rains and good harvest. Under the practice of *meriah* they sacrificed human beings to *Tanapenu* for giving good crop. The priest in *Kui* culture was a simple man in the village who pays equal subscription and conducts rituals on specific occasions, on invitation of a person or a village. In the rituals of birth, marriage and death the elders of the family perform the rites. Even the person in charge of *Dharni Penu* i.e. guarding deity of the village was changed in rotation. The priest plays a role when there is a major occasion viz. *kedu*, *rahalaka*, someone’s illness or an unnatural death.

The *Kui* people had never named their religion even in *Kui* language. They worshipped Gods as spirits and never had any idol or image. The worship was not affected even when the place or person in charge of worship ever changed. The *Kui* culture was in due course plagued with images, idols and epics of Hinduism. Under the pressure of Sanskritisation the Gods, the rituals, hymns etc. were pushed into oblivion giving way to Hindu Gods and Goddesses, construction of numerous temples and performance of *yajnas* in many villages. Eminent writer like Shri



Sarangadhar Pradhan drew a parallel of *Bura Penu* with Lord Vishnu and *Dharni Penu*, the earth goddess with Durga in the Hindu pantheon. Shri Sudaya Pradhan has composed many devotional songs in Kui in praise of Hindu Gods Rama and Krishna. He has also translated the Bhagwat Gita into Kui language. Now a days many a villages have *sankirtan mandalis*, a Vaishnavite mode of name recitation in light of Lord Chaitanya. The *dandanata*, performed in the month of Chaitra is a festival centered in worship of Lord Shiva. Besides the mainstream of Hindu religion there are some neo-Hinduism sects in the district. These sects propagate their founders as Gods and are in no confrontation with Hinduism. The sects of Saibaba, Thakur Anukulchandra, Swami Nigamanand and Alekha Dharma have a noticeable presence in the district. During the land survey and settlement people were asked to state their religion for record. Non-availability of any sect name and ever expanding scope of Hinduism to take into its fold had the people of *Kui dina* converted into Hinduism, even before their knowledge of the religion recorded in their land records.

II

The Christian missionaries made their entry to this forbidden land following the footprints of British Army chasing the Bhanja King in thirties of nineteenth century. In the pretext of suppressing human sacrifice and female infanticide British undertook annexation of these areas during 1836 to 1886. The missionary activities started intensively, playing role of civilising the *khonds*, was a sort of annexing the minds of people. The rescued *meriah* children were sent to missionary orphanages where they were trained into future activists. Baptist Mission Society and Roman Catholic Church were two main lines of action.

The first Church by BMS was formed at Mallikapori and foundation of first Church building

was laid in 1920 at Kumbharikupa. In 1931 all the local Churches were united under the Khond Hills District Church Union. In 1938, the Moorehead Memorial Christian Hospital opened the centre of O.J. Millman that fostered modern treatment to the people of this area. By 1940, mission activity spread into Balliguda area and up to hill tracts near the river Tel.

Millman soon realised that one or two government schools opened in hill tracts imparted education in Odia medium were making no effect. Odia was an alien language to people of this locality. So, he started the first school in Kui language in Mallikapori. The same experiment bore fruit in preaching too. The missionaries adopted titles of the functionaries of Church in Kui language. The Church elders were called "*Deridada*" and "*Deribai*". The Gospels, Chapters of the Bible were translated into Kui by Millman and other missionaries. The most significant work by another missionary W.W. Winfield was the composition of "*Grammar of Kui Language*" and "*Vocabulary of Kui Language*". Both the works were published by Asiatic Society of Bengal and till date are the most referred books on the language. Later, a number of church songs were written in Kui Language. Sunampatra Nayak, Rupabati Pradhan were forerunners in this regard. As on today, the whole Bible has been translated in Kui by the Bible Society of India and the same is undoubtedly the largest book in Kui so far. The Roman Catholic Church has published a Kui book "*Kristo Dharma Kata*", which describes the ritual procedures in Church.

The missionary preaching consisted of the Doctrine of Original Sin and man as its inheritor. For salvation, the person has to realise his sin and repent for that. He will alone be saved if he accepts Jesus Christ as his only saviour God. He should follow the words of God (the Bible) as well as



rules and restrictions of Church. Church was not only a place of worship, it also acted as a watchman of the convert's personal conduct and social activities. It questioned the existing faiths (animism and Hinduism) asking what their God can do for them. They identified Gods of Kui people with mere stones and Satan. The method of worship by sacrificing fowls and animals was ridiculed. On the other hand, the Christians openly gave evidence (*Sakshya*) from personal experiences about their realisation and grace of their God.

The social condition of the converts also changed for better. Church was a place of "No Caste". This social equalisation attracted the lower castes i.e. the scheduled caste people into the Church fold. They could sit in the same row with higher caste, i.e. Khonds and outsiders. Missions also provided facility for education and often helped the converts economically by providing medical aid, warm clothing, etc. The converts could hope for getting a job/engagement for their children in mission and its various organisations. The government treats the scheduled caste Christians as "General Category" with no facility of reservation in contrast to converted scheduled tribes. The policy of Church was a slow and steady process what Sashi Bhusan Thiady calls "Homeopathic doses". Perhaps, it is the feeling of social equality and equal gender participation in activities of religion has kept many scheduled caste Christians bonded with Church.

By conversion into Christianity the people slowly drifted away from their original society. Instructions for regular attendance of church, change in birth, marriage and death rituals, method of treatment such as miraculous healing distinguishingly set them apart. Church wanted to create another society within the society. The converts, virtually became outcastes from their own brethren. In case of breach of rule, church

too threatened or effectively outcasted a convert from church rituals viz. holy feast (*Prabhu bhoji*) or/and attending church. Thus it dangled an element of insecurity for the converts when they think of taking a U-turn.

III

The district of Kandhamal for last twenty years or so has entered third phase of religious conversion. This phase began with revival of ardent Hinduism. The people who were converted to Christianity are lured back to the fold of Hinduism. Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, VHP and its brigade spearhead this activity. The Sangh Pariwar has a good network operating at village and district level. The Sanskruti Bhawan activists hold regular *sakha* where games, use of lathi etc. is taught and practised. They don uniform of black cap, white shirt, khaki half-pant and leather belt along with a lathi, which becomes an integral part of whole activities. These *sakhas* are used to teach values like *Go-raksha* and other policies of Sangh. They too hold district and state level *shivirs*. The basic theory followed is the theory of insecurity. It portrays that imminent danger is looming on Hinduism. The number of Muslims is increasing. Muslims being numerically insignificant in the district the target and policy is applied to Christians *mutatis mutandis*. The Christians are defiling Hindu places of worship, churches being constructed near/on traditional places of Hindu (i.e. animistic) worship, a Hindu student is beaten by Christian teacher etc. hammered into peoples' mind. Swami Lakshmananand has been a pivot, advocating Sangh policies in this area. Adding to this, the rath yatras, Ramsila procession, organisation of numerous yajnas and *astaprahari-naam sankirtan* has strengthened the network. The policy of *trishul dharan* added armament to the policy of insecurity and hatred. This has resulted in outburst of violence in the form of church burning



and attack on Christians throughout the district recently. Out of three similar incidents, two places-Burbinaju and Raikia were in news being the places of visit of Mrs. Indira Gandhi and Rajeev Gandhi as Prime Ministers of India.

Swami Lakshmananand has a Sanskrit gurukul at Chakapad and started a Girls High School at Jalespata. The medical unit, Dhanwantari Swasthya Kendra, one of such started at Kotingia (19Km from G.Udayagiri) could not run for long time. It welcomes the converted Christians to its fold through rituals during a yajna or at Ashram of Swamiji. Thus, Swamiji has been the sole pass-issuing authority to Hinduism in Kandhamal. The new walkover is reported in local dailies as “returned to their original religion”.

IV

To sum up, religious conversion in Kandhamal has passed through three stages i.e. Animism to Hinduism, Hinduism to Christianity and Christianity to Hinduism. Why the people are religion-nomads ? Is their quest for salvation not adequately answered in any of the religions ? Have they changed for better? Reply to these questions can be searched in the socio-economic condition of people.

As discussed earlier, Hinduism has taken sway over their religious practices. Hinduism has been called as *Mahasindhu*, an ocean which can accommodate more people to its fold. In the past, the descendants of the invaders from the west viz. Sakas and Huns were taken to the main fold of Hindu society as *AgneeKul Kshetriyas* *. The new phase of Hinduism has witnessed organisation of numerous yajnas. The people who never milched their cows saying, “ the milk is for the calf” are burning ghee in barrels. In their animistic days they used stale eggs, a handful of rice, piece of raw turmeric, home brewed Mohua liquor,

home-bred fowl, goat or pigs for sacrifice. The sacrificial meriah or buffalo was bought by collecting money from the community. The current Hindu practices are performed via market. The incense sticks, clothes, ghee and exhaustive list of materials used for are to be procured from market by selling their agricultural produce or wages earned. The practices of *Trinath Mela*, *Naam sankirtan*, *sankranti mela*, *Dussehra*, *Diwali* etc. are directly linked to market not controlled by these people. The festivals give people a face-lift and unity to some extent, but it has sanctified place of a middleman, a Brahmin priest in their affairs with God. Sometimes there arises need of a high caste cook. The Hindu revival is also following the policy of outcasting and it can not throw away the caste hierarchy for good. The Brahmin only knows the *devabhasa* i.e. the language of Gods. Does not God understand everyone’s language? Organising of such high cost events has resulted in collecting a good amount of money from the villagers, shopkeepers and rest from the vehicles plying nearby. The situation sometimes is not very pleasant one.

It is also being seen that marriage and *sradha* of parents in Vedic format is on increase. The performers think that this will give them a face-lift as well as *punya*. Earlier marriage ceremony was simple and less expensive in the format of *sitekalu-gatimuda-Ranja* vis-à-vis an elaborate system of *deri sedi* or *sendanisedi* for the rich. Dowry system, which was not traditionally in the Kui culture, is entering the society in one form or other among the elites. Sooner or later this will trickle down to the common people and there will be no shame in demanding the ransom openly. The periodicity of rituals will also ask for recurring expenditure. Those who are converted back to Hinduism will be stacked to their respective caste hierarchy and there is no escape from potent discrimination.



Many of those who converted to Christianity had enjoyed economic benefit, though sporadically, directly or indirectly. Christianity in Kandhamal has manifested in various sects than traditional Roman Catholic and Baptists. This has sometimes led to inter-church discrimination. However, the church festivals/rituals being limited, less expensive and less wasteful do not tax as much as their Hindu neighbours. Education acquired through any source has kindled hope for getting a safe government job. To avail the benefit of reservation many Christians are lured to/or think it wise to be converted back into Hinduism, at least in government records. In this economics lies the philosophy of re-conversion.

In animism, Hinduism and Christianity people have enough Gods and religion. And, all three forces are in operation in Kandhamal till date. The district has a very limited tract of cultivable land and irrigation for namesake. A crop failure multiplies their plight geometrically. A large number of youth travel to states like Kerala and Gujrat in search of work. They need no religion so urgently than the religion of bread. Swami Vivekananda had said "if you teach philosophy to a hungry man he will throw stones at you". When that day will dawn in Kandhamal ?

Notes and References:

- * The theory of Agnikula origin of the Rajputs is given in *Prithviraj Raso* of Chand Bardai. According to this theory, Parsuram, an incarnation of Vishnu, destroyed all the Kshatriyas. However, the Brahmins felt the need of warrior class to

defend them. They offered prayers to God at top of Mount Abu. A great Havan was performed for about 40 days. Their prayers brought forth fruit, and from that *Agnikund* or fire pit, there sprang up four heroes and each one of them created a separate Rajput class. Thus came into existence the Chauhans, the Solankis or Chalukyas, the Parmaars and the Pratiharas. This theory still finds credence among the Rajputs. Dr. D. R. Bhandarkar and others have found in this myth a confirmation of their theory of the foreign origin of the Rajputs. According to Edwards, the Agnikul myth represents a rite of purgation by fire, the scene of which was in Southern Rajputana whereby the impurity of foreigners was removed and they became fit to enter caste system. The fictitious character of the story is obvious. It represents a Brahmanical effort to find a lofty origin for the Kshatriya who stood very high in the social order and who gave them a lot of money in charity.

Books :

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