

Conversion: A discourse

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Introduction: -

India showed the spiritual path to the whole World. It has a long history. In a crisis period of Vedic civilization, Buddhism emerged in 6th Century B. C., which made a stir in the Universe. From Lord Buddha (C. 566 B.C.) to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486 A.D.), India followed a humanitarian and philanthropic way for the salvation of mankind. This noble path paved the way for other religions. In 3rd Century B. C., Great Ruler Asoka followed and succeeded in this way. For that reason English writer Herbert George Wells wrote, `` amidst the tens of thousands of the names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history... the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone a star. From Volga to Japan his name is still honoredⁱ.” India had never passed through military aggression in religious matter and never occupied one inch territory for imperial interest. But Christian religion placed its feet in Indian Territory with a disguise. They had secret agenda of imperialism; Conversion was the open scheme of their undisclosed will.

The Portuguese missionaries were the pioneers in this field. They apparently forgot the medieval ideas of conquest for conversion especially along the coastal regions of Kerala over which they had only a coastal hegemony.ⁱⁱ Often they pressed the local lords to make them permit their tenants become Christians if they desired. They did not want to force the natives but to win over their heart by giving them some advantages. On the Kerala coast the Portuguese did not go to extreme and were more gracious in their attitude towards the problem of conversion. They wanted to adjust themselves to the local practices, though they regarded these as nothing but superstitions.ⁱⁱⁱ They wanted to sketch on the similarities between the Hindu and Christian religion, such as- Hindu *Avatara* and Christian **Incarnation**, *Trimurti* and the Christian **Trinity** etc.

Community Life:-

After the expansion of Aryan culture in various parts of India the adivasi society was being exposed to the Hindu society. The impact of Hindu society changed the methods of production and distribution of the adivasis. They absorbed within the Hindu society as *a jati* and adopted settled cultivation. They became a part of the *Jati-based economic system which involved fixed occupations for the Jatis* and regulated distribution of products and services. Within the Hindu society each group was assigned a particular occupation according to its capabilities and local needs. The group was supposed to pursue the occupation hereditarily^{iv}. The adivasis were newcomers in Hindu *Jati* system; so they were deprived. The freedom of economic pursuits which they had enjoyed in their adivasi life was far beyond. But within the Hindu society they were permitted to retain their cultural heritage, their original beliefs, customs and practices. There was however an inevitable tendency among the transformed adivasis to modify their cultural heritage according to the cultural norms of the Hindu society, particularly by adopting the features of the religion of Brahmanism.^v

In India production was based upon a system of hereditary guilds for a long time. These caste-guilds enjoyed a fairly large measure of autonomy, for they framed their own laws which were put into execution by the State.^{vi} Small self-governing republics were built up by the village communities. In this community life money was not a factor; the exchange of goods and services was the prime factor. They followed the ancient exchange system in their day to day life. Thus, economic securities were guaranteed by the village communities. The Adivasi people had their own beliefs and customs which were parallel to the Hindu Brahmanical tradition. They set their rules as their own in the dense forest and hilly areas of Eastern India. It can be mentioned that the adivasi law system was not compatible with the modern law. They cleared the forests to make space for agricultural land that could be ploughed. So, they thought that they were the real owner of that newly created arable land. Although all the requirements of the adivasis were not fulfilled, yet they led a happy life with the few commodities they had received from nature. The adivasis were attracted by the false promises of the missionaries. They inspired people to change their religion and in return they would take them to the world of happiness in all aspects of life. As a result, prosylitization continued through generations

Propagation of Christianity in India:-

In the threshold of the nineteenth century, British authorities felt that the expansion of Christianity was essential in India for their imperial interest. Because they could not reach in the hilly and dense forested areas of the Eastern India. They thought, the missionaries were the only men who might reach those areas with religious candle. As a result, the Baptist Missionary Society had been founded in 1792 and it was followed by the foundation of the London Missionary Society in 1795 and the Church Missionary Society in 1790.^{vii} But during the initial phase, British East India company's authority was hostile with the missionaries and so that the missionaries shifted their headquarters to the Danish occupied Serampore. From Serampore they began to spread Christian religion and linguistic works also.

The ultimate aim of the Christian missionaries was to expansion of Christian religion by any means. But their efforts achieved very little success and Ward regretted in 1808 that conversions among the Heathens are very rare.^{viii} It can be mentioned that by 1810 only 300 people were converted. Both the Hindus and Muslims were opposed the missionaries for conversion. East India Company's authorities were also against this conversion. They did not want that the missionary will interfere in the social or religious matters because of the security of the Company's rule in Bengal Presidency. To face the problems in Calcutta centric region, the missionaries looked forward to adivasi belt of Eastern India, which was a lonely land for the so-called civilization. As a result, a German Mission reached at Ranchi in March 1845.

The journey of the German missionaries:-

Johannes Gossner had become acquainted with India by an Englishmen, named Mr. Start and so he began work in 1833 in connection with him in the plains of the Ganges.^{ix} This work developed Ganges mission of which separate reports were published by the Rev. Lorbeer at Ghazipur. In 1844 a new opportunity was offered to Rev. Gossner by the widow of a physician and explorer, Dr. Helfer, who was willing to make over to Gossner's Mission her house and property at Mergui, port of Burma, for the purpose of founding a mission for the Careenes.^x On December 31, 1844 four missionaries (Schatz, Batsch, Brandt, Janke) arrived at Calcutta with the intention to go to Burma if the auxiliary Mission Committee consisting of Gossner's friends would advise them to do so. But the Calcutta friends were decidedly against their proceeding to

Burma probably because the American Baptist Missionary Society had begun work amongst the Careenes. Another plan was to go to Kotgar in the Himalayas, where Rev. Prochnow asked for assistance to start a mission in Tibet. But at that time war was going on between the English and Shikhs and so the building of a station was impossible. The four missionaries were staying at Calcutta for two months without making a stable decision. One day they attracted their attention to a group of people working as coolies, who were carrying heavy loads, cleaning the streets, mending the roads, and doing similar kind of works. Feeling compassion on them it came, as it were, to their minds as a revelation that the adivasi to whom these degraded persons belonged should receive the Gospel through their mediation. Being corroborated in their sympathy with these people by the Calcutta friends they started on February 26, 1845 towards their home country to Ranchi.^{xi}

In 1846, the first pioneers were strengthened by three new workers, the candidate Ansoerge, the teacher Heinrich Batsch, and the carpenter Buchwald, so that a new station, Domba, 9 miles south-west of Ranchi, could be built and made over to the charge of Brandt and H. Batsch. In the neighbourhood of this station was a big bazaar from where the word preached to numerous people week by week spread to far distances. In 1847, three new missionaries, Sieck, Boerner, Behrens, and a bride for H. Batsch arrived. And again in 1848 another missionary, a medical man, Conrad, was sent out, and a second centre was established in Lohardaga, 48 miles west of Ranchi.^{xii}

In the year 1849, again four missionaries arrived ranchi, namely- Cand. Gerndt, Rud. Gerndt, Matthias, Mueller and with them Mrs. Gerndt, Miss Marie Bussenius and Miss Anna Holzhausen. After three months, Oscar Lohr and Adolph Bussenius joined with them. The Fourth station was founded in Govindpur, 30 miles south-west from Ranchi in 1850.

Gossner's Mission- After arrival at Ranchi:-

For the first five years 17 missionaries and 4 lady missionaries had been sent to the Kols and they did not convert anybody. Branch stations were opened at Domba(1846), Lohardaga(1848) and Govindpur(1850).^{xiii} In spite of their best efforts, the missionaries could not make any conversion outside for about four and a half years. Being tired and discouraged, they wrote to Rev. Gossner that the people would not be converted and that they should be permitted to go to

another area and work.^{xiv} Though six of them died and some gave up mission work. Due to the inexperience with the Indian climate, all had to suffer more or less from fevers.^{xv} In the beginning of 1850, four adivasi people (Oraons) came towards them with a curiosity. They wanted to know about the missionary activities. They said that they had read in a book of someone 'Jesus'. The word had pleased them.^{xvi} The adivasis were requested to come to the evening prayer meeting. Missionaries were also interested about the aboriginal people. Though they were pleased with the word they heard. They went back, but returned after some time and gradually realized that Jesus could not be seen here on earth with bodily eyes but only through the eyes of faith. Then they asked to be instructed and baptized.

Eventually, it had been noticed that a socio-economic problem arosed in Chotanagpur division vigorously. The adivasi society of Jungle Mahal was the very sufferer due to the Zamindari system. Eastern India in general and Chotanagpur in particular, the exploitation was acute; the hilly and forest dwellers were accursed. Hindu Zamindars and their allied priests often used to collect money by the name of God. Not only that they have been used in domestic works in without wages. Land holders, Traders, Money lenders, Policemen and Europeans had followed the same line of oppression. The adibasis were virtually sucked by a double set of leeches- the extortionate zamindars and cunning money lenders. Slowly but surely the adibasis soon found themselves in a stage of bondage, which was nothing but a form of slavery.^{xvii} They thought for a long time as that was their only fate.

Suddenly Missionaries came to their life like a Messiah. But at the initial stage they preached and taught the poor adivasis for a period of four years. In this stage they were frustrated and wrote to Gossner that the ground had been torn up and sown but no fruit had appeared, the Kols were not converted and they wished to look for another field. Rev. Gossner replied them: "whether the Kols will be converted or not, that be not your concern. If they will not accept the word for salvation they must hear it for judgment. But you continue in praying and working, we also will pray more earnestly.^{xviii}" Thereupon they were baptized on the 9th June of 1850. The names of these first converts were: Kasu, Bandhu, Gurha and Nawin Porin. In this year they baptized eleven adults. Rev. Schatz wrote to Rev. Gossner: "you must sing a song of joy with us; yea all near and far praise the Lord, hosiannah to the Lord! The Kols have caught fire; the

Kols have turned to the other side.... Now they were willing. The 9th of June was an important grand day to us.^{xix}”

Conversion in progress:-

In November 18, 1851, seventeen months after the baptism of the first inquirers the foundation stone of the Christ Church was laid. The building was planned to hold 800 individuals, though at that time the congregation was very small in gesture. But the work load increased day after day. The converts were looking forward to preach their lessons in 1853. It could be said that they carried on the work almost more than the missionaries. When the construction of the Church at Ranchi was completed in Christmas 1855, it was so small for the whole congregation, that consisted in April 1856 of 466 baptized members and 800 inquirers could not be fit into it. In the spring season of the year 1857, the Church grew remarkably. This year 185 people were baptized and new inquirers came in crowds, a huge number of villagers were ready to join the congregation. The missionaries and few catechists could not teach the new inquirers alone, the school boys belonging to the junior sections also used to teach them the words of the catechism.

Joseph Mullens has given a statistics from original letters and local Reports about conversion:^{xx}

Year	Baptized
1851	27
1852	38
1854	65
1856	96
1857	420

Mullens had shown that the process of baptism was quiet peaceful at the initial stage. But soon the Zamindars of that area opposed against the conversion and brought to bear against them all the social persecution they could command. False charges were brought against them in the courts, their houses were plundered by armed bands, the large rice- stores carried off, the very roofs of their houses taken away, and money and the women’s ornaments forcibly seized. Most

patiently did they bear the outrages from which they so deeply suffered; grace was given them to “take joyfully the spoiling of their goods^{xxi}” But we have to remember that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. When the local Zamindars and land holders saw that the Christian missionaries were interfering upon the Indian religious system, they roared. That is why they were protested against it. Every religious system desired that there must not be any interference by any other religion. We all know that if they did so, war would break out; the history of Crusade between the Christians and the Muslims proves it.

Conversion after the Sepoy Mutiny:-

The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 disturbed the conversion process because military operations could jeopardize the process. When the Sepoy mutiny broke out in 1857, the Christians had to fear the worst. First it seemed as if chota Nagpur would be spared; for when the news of the fall of the old Mohammadan capital Delhi came all had been quiet in chota Nagpur. But the Sepoy regiment at Hazaribagh began to join the mutineers, and after four days it was reported to Ranchi that the town had been plundered and burnt down. All Europeans fled to Calcutta and the missionaries had to leave their stations and their congregations to save their own life and their wives and children.^{xxii} It was on July 31, that the missionaries assembled all Christians then present at Ranchi, and having prayed with them and explained how things stood bade them farewell and left them to the village. It was in the worst time of the rainy season, and everybody acquainted with the trouble of travelling in the rains can imagine what hardships the missionaries with their families had to undergo before they reached Calcutta.^{xxiii}

In the meantime Ranchi was plundered by the mutineers. They sought to destroy the Ranchi Church. The Christians were persecuted and illtreated. The Christian houses and villages to which the mutineers could proceed were plundered, the inhabitants had to flee and to spend six weeks in the jungles, mountains, and cavities without any other food than roots and leaves; many of the fugitives died or got ill.^{xxiv} Those who caught by the rebels were abused, derided and mocked at in the rudest manner. In the end of 1857 the mutineers were defeated and the missionaries could return. None of them lost his life and they began with new strength to make up for the heavy loss. It was impossible to resume work on any other station than Ranchi. So, one may understand that local land lords and Zamindars were not so cruel that loss of life might occur. The European writers were always portraying about the hostilities of the Hindus, but the

Hindus could not kill a person. So cruelty was not very severe as they mentioned often. Majority of the people rejected their view about religion; they never deviated from the path of Hinduism.

Rev. Schatz had returned to Germany and reported to father Gossner how things stood after the mutiny. Father Gossner then was in the verge of death, more than 84 years old. He earnestly consulted with Rev. Schatz what should be done after his departure. Father Gossner died on March, 1858, but his work was founded upon the rock steadfast and immovable to all ages. His last words he wrote in his mission periodical, as- “die Biene auf dem Missions-Felde”(“Rise, my dear friends ! The Lord has spoken, let us hear ! ”)^{xxv}

The German Missionaries were returning from Calcutta to Ranchi in the month of January 1859. On their way to Ranchi they halted at Tulin (near Jhalda, Purulia) where a fair (*Pous Mela*) was being held at that time. Tulin’s *Pous Mela* was one of the oldest fair in Purulia district. A large gathering from different nearby places attended that fair. The missionaries camped there for some days and they felt to preach the good news of Lord Jesus and distributed the Bengali leaflets of the Gospel.^{xxvi}

According Daniel Sandil, There was a group of people of this area who were known as *Nirgunia* or *Kabipanthi*. They often met themselves in a place and discussed among them about religion and God. They were searching for a God and religion where they could get joy and peace. It was remarkable to note that this group was from different community such as Mahato, Bhumij, Munda, Tambuli etc. But they were very liberal minded people. These people were from different places of nearby villages such as Jargo, Brahmandih, Koreng, Ukada, Burda, Tuta, Shilli, Mizra etc. Nabin Chandra Mahato of Jargo who was the leader of this group was also attending the fair at Tulin with his followers. He was personally very much attracted by the preaching of the gospel by the missionaries and was very eager to know the Christian philosophy. The missionaries requested him to go to Ranchi to meet them at Ranchi with his followers.

In September 1860, Nabin Chandra Mahato with thirty four person of Jargo, Brahmandih, Shilli, Maghadorpa, Koreng, Ukada, Burda and Tuta went to Ranchi and met Rev. E. Schatz. Rev. Schatz arranged fooding and lodging for them and taught them the Gospel. He discussed with them the Christian philosophy and the Teachings of Lord Jesus. They learned the Gospel under

the guidance of Rev. E. Schatz for about a month. Nine out of thirty four people took baptism by Rev. E. Schatz at Ranchi on 1st October 1860.

The names of the first baptized persons of Manbhum(Purulia) were as follows:-^{xxvii}

Non Christian Name	Baptized Name	Village
1. Nabin Chandra Mahato	Poulus Nemo	Jargo
2. Malini Mahato	Mariam Nemo	Jargo
3. Becharam Mahato	Christdhar Choube	Jargo
4. Nabinchandra Nandi	Johan Nandi	Jargo
5. Rainu Nandi	Salmi Nandi	Jargo
6. Laxminarayan Munda	Peter Peuka	Jargo
7. Mansaram Mahato	Aram Amrit	Koreng
8. Menoka Mahato	Martha Amrit	Koreng
9. Prakash Asna	Moshi Prakash Asna	Shilli

After baptism they stayed in Ranchi for few more days and then came back to their own villages. Nabin Mahato, alias Poulus Nemo was a famous religious personality in Jargo and adjacent area; he and his wife Mariam Nemo were like a revealer of divine will; their contribution among the poor's makes them very renowned.

After Rev. Gossner's death or after the Sepoy mutiny Chota Nagpur witnessed a rapid progress of missionary activities. People came to get enlisted as inquirers and many who had been instructed were desirous of being baptized. The fifty Christian villages that were counted before the mutiny had grown in November 1858 to 205 and in Christmas about 1500 Christians had come to Ranchi and more than 150 families manifested by breaking the caste their willingness to give up heathenism. These were followed by sixty families who came on New Year's Day 1859.^{xxviii} It Was said that the whole tribe of the Mundas would turn at once and altogether to Christianity. The movement amongst the heathen was so mighty that the aborigines feared lest their landlords, the Hindu Zamindars, also should become Christians and that than things would be worse than ever, since they never would give up the habit to deprive poor people of their land.

This is true that the Hindu Zamindars and landlords were not very friendly to the adivasis; yet majority of the people were less interested to follow the Christian religion.

After 1860, the number of Christians increased at an average of 1225 per year for the next seven years.^{xxix} Branch stations were opened at Purulia(1863) in Manbhum District and Chaibasa(1865) and Porahat(1867) in Singhbhum District. In this period the number of Christians was 10,274.^{xxx} At the end of 1861, the number of converted persons were 2400 but at the end of 1871 this number rapidly increased and it was 20727.

Statistics of the Kol Missions in Chota Nagpur in 1871:-^{xxxi}

1.) Native Christians of the German Mission:-	14107
2.) Native Christians of the Propagation Society's Mission:-	6620
3.) Communicants in Both Missions:-	6233
4.) Separate Congregations:-	143
5.) Towns and villages containing Christians:-	811
6.) Native Preachers:-	105
7.) Native Christian Teachers	56
8.) Schools:-	62
9.) Scholars, Male and Female:-	1297

Conclusion:-

It has been claimed till date that missionaries, especially those working in ex-colonial or Third World countries, also see themselves as civilizers bearing gifts, as teachers who bring to others the knowledge and skills for a better way of life, as healers of both physical and spiritual ills; corollaries of the salvation they preach, the individuality they embody. In their actions, however, missionaries challenge custom and tradition.^{xxxii} Of course it cannot be denied that the European missionaries played an important role for the spread of western education in India. This is partly correct because the Christians and British Government in India had patronized them. Government desired that the missionaries might take the responsibilities to establish the British authority in the hilly and forested areas of Eastern India where administration was weak. For thousand years, India was a country of Hindu people and the Hindu way of life is still continued here by the majority. Many invaders came here to plunder or to occupy this rich land (in all

scales of civilization). They also tried to convert the people of India, but lastly they failed to do so, though a very minor percentage was converted by the alluring speech of the missionaries. The adivasis were so poor that free thinking was absurd to them. The Europeans could not learn any lesson from it. They thought if some privileges have been given to them they will be converted. Because they were severely oppressed by the natives, who belong to the upper section of the society; like Zamindars, land holders etc. By capitalizing their poverty, they wanted to convert the people in general and the adivasis in particular. It can be mentioned here that spiritualism is not a matter of sale in the market. When a group of people has initiated it then it is realized that they had some secret aims and objectives. If we presume that every religion is equal and great in content, then there is no necessity of conversion. So we can conclude that the work and endeavors of the Christian missionaries could not satisfy the adivasis. The indigenous people considered that missionaries work was an unacceptable assault on their cultural and religious matters. As the numbers of conversions increased, so a Hindu community begins to take shape to protest against it, the Hindu community was bound to do so. It was a question of their existence, which they inherited from time immemorial. It is better to say that they were assembled to save their culture from alienation by the missionaries.

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