



# CONTESTATION OF TRIBAL IDENTITY IN JHARKHAND

Ankur Krishna

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History and Culture, Jamia Millia Islamia

University, New Delhi-110025

## ABSTRACT

*Jharkhand, a state rich in tribal culture, is home to tribals belonging to different religious groups, like the Sarna Tribals, the Hindu Tribals and the Christian Tribals. The presence of multiple religious identities has led to diverse contestations among various religious groups over the tribal identity. This article explores how these contestations have shaped the tribal community's identity and brought significant transformations to their lives.*

**Keywords:** Tribes, Scheduled Tribes, Sarnas, Christianity, Hinduism, Jharkhand, Identity.

## INTRODUCTION

Jharkhand, known for its tribal dominance, has witnessed ongoing debates about tribal identity by various religious groups. Here at a given point of time, a particular form of identity of the tribals becomes dominant over the others. For instance, if we take example of tribal Christians, we will come to know that there have been times when the Christian identity of the tribal Christians has been dominant and the ethnic dormant. But at other times, the ethnic identity has become prominent and the Christian identity has been played down. Moreover, when the tribals underwent conversions under the leadership of various religious groups, a part from the tribal life was removed and replaced. But it did not mean that other parts of the tribal culture were left undisturbed, and functioning in a similar way as they were before the replacement, and that, the part which was replaced, completely disappeared from the scene or was rooted out of its original cultural matrix. In other words, with the acceptance of other religions, the entire socio-religious set-up of the tribals has undergone a heavy transformation. Thus, it is also important to understand the transformations that happened among the tribal societies after coming in contact with these religious groups.

As we all know that the issue of the identity of the tribals has already been bone of contention since the independence in India. The constitution guarantees certain privileges to the ST's. Many groups in the country by virtue of their 'Tribeness' are 'Scheduled' as 'Tribes' irrespective of their religious affiliations. Hence, a contestation over the ST status of the tribals in Jharkhand is not without nuances. Contestation of this nature has serious implications for the identity not only of the tribal Christians, and tribal Hindus, but

also for the tribes in general. Thus, this research paper broadly explains the problem of the Scheduled Tribe identity of the tribals of Jharkhand from three perspectives: Contestation of tribal identity by the Sarnas, Contestation of tribal identity by Hinduism, and Contestation of tribal identity by Christianity. These three approaches are taken under consideration because most of the tribals of Jharkhand belong to these three religions. There are the indigenous Sarna Tribals, then there are tribals who follow Hinduism and the tribals who also got converted into Christianity. These three religions have worked among the tribals of Jharkhand and tribals belonging to all these three religions at present are fighting for their respective identities. This led to the contestation of tribal identity among various religious groups and the present unrest in the state of Jharkhand.

### **Contestation of Tribal Identity by the Sarnas**

The Sarna Tribals are the original indigenous tribals of Jharkhand region and they are trying to assert their identity since long time. As a portion of the tribals in this region underwent religious conversions into Christianity and some tribals also followed Hinduism, thus the Sarna Tribals have to share the space with the tribals belonging to these two religious communities. Moreover, the Sarna tribals considered the Christian tribals as the 'Other'. It is argued here that the Sarna tribal's perception of the Tribal Christian identity either as 'tribal' or 'non-tribal' creates a space for the assertion of their own identity. If some sections of the Sarna tribals challenge the identity of the tribal Christians as 'Scheduled Tribe', it is to bolster the assertion of the Sarna tribals about themselves as tribals.

The contestation of tribal identity by the Sarnas in Jharkhand region can be understood by few examples. First example is the efforts made by Kartik Oraon for de-scheduling the Christian tribes. The late Kartik Oraon, a powerful tribal leader from Jharkhand, posed a serious challenge to the question of the 'Schedule Tribe' identity of the tribal Christians. In the general elections of 1962, David Munzi, an Oraon Lutheran Christian, an independent candidate from Lohardaga Lok Sabha seat (ST's), defeated Kartik, contesting on the Congress ticket. After the defeat, Kartik filed an election suit against Munzi in the Ranchi Election Tribunal contending that 'As a Christian, Munzi was not entitled to contest from a seat reserved for Scheduled Tribes candidates'. Kartik argued that Munzi was not eligible on the ground that 'as a Christian' he was no longer an Oraon tribal since he, abandoned the animistic faith, did not follow the manners and customs of the tribe and had no affinity of interest or aspirations with the tribal people.

Another example related to the identity of the Christian tribals in Jharkhand region is the 'Nemha' Bible controversy which engulfed the region in mutual suspicion and hatred between the groups, the Sarna community and Church. It was about the 'Kundukh' translation of the Bible published by the Bible society of India, Bangalore, which allegedly carried some derogatory remarks about the Sarna religion. Some Sarna leaders, with close links with the Sangh Parivar, raked up the issue. On 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2008, this issue was raised in the Jharkhand Legislative Assembly by Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) MLA's. A number of meetings, demonstrations and rallies, organised by the Sangh Parivar, were held at various districts to protest against the Church for hurting the religious sentiments of the Sarna community.

In June, 2013, a new 'religious' controversy started in Ranchi. The unveiling by Cardinal Toppo of the statue of Mother Mary wearing a red-bordered sari and holding Jesus Christ in a way tribal women of Jharkhand hold their babies, by tying them to a white cloth, created a controversy. The said statue was unveiled in a church at Singpur in Dhurwa, which is not very far from Ranchi. Processions were taken out by a small fraction of the Sarna society under the leadership of Bandhan Tigga, who claims to be a 'Dharmaguru (Priest) of Sarna society. The contention of Bandhan Tigga was, anybody can wear a white saree with red border but making Mother Mary wear it seems to be a tactic to convert the Sarna Tribals into Christianity. Mother Mary was foreigner and showing her as a tribal woman is definitely not correct. It is a well-known fact that the Sarnas worship Mother Nature or Maa Sarna. Tigga is of the opinion that the Christians are trying to establish Mother Mary as Maa Sarna to confuse the people of Sarna society. These two cases against the Church are based on the argument that the latter is engaged in allegedly distorting tribal culture and identity, which the Church does not accept.

There is also controversy regarding the 'Formalization of the Sarna Prayer' and its process of evolution. The Sarna prayer is been called as 'Prayer of Faith' and encapsulates the belief of the Sarna tribals in their deities, Dharmes and Chala Paccho. The prayer has been now introduced in a more formalised way and is now been recited before starting any venture in life. The Christians are now of the opinion that the Sarna tribals are now trying to imitate the Christians. As the Christians go from house to house during the month of May praying in each of the Christian families. In the same way, the Sarnas have started their own. Thus, in this case of the formalization of the Sarna prayers emerges the issues of, the assertion of the Sarna distinctiveness, from the Christians as well as from the Hindus, and openness for adaptations to the changing times.

Recently, the Chief Minister of Jharkhand and leader of Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, Hemant Soren, who himself belong to the Sarna tribal community, mentioned that Adivasis were never Hindus and neither are they now. This was in response to his attempt to get 'Sarna Code' approved by the Narendra Modi government at the Centre. He further mentioned that the Sarna Code establishes a separate religion and a distinct, honourable identity for the Adivasis away from the Hindu identity- which is usually assumed as such for the tribals. The dominant caste Savarna Hindus have taken for granted the status of Adivasi and Dalits as being Hindu. It is used to construct a false notion of Hindu majority society.

### **Contestation of Tribal Identity by Hinduism**

The second mode of contestation of the tribal identity in Jharkhand is by the Hindutva forces. The main contentions of the Hindutva forces are, "Tribals are Hindus" whereas the "Tribal Christians are Non-Tribals". Many of the important tribal political leaders in Jharkhand have brought to limelight and protested against few cases whereby the tribals are depicted as Hindus in the Gazetteers. Some examples are, Paul Hansda, Minister for Tribal welfare in the Government of Bihar, wrote to the Minister in the Revenue Department in the Government of Bihar, in protest against the inclusion of the Scheduled Tribes with the Hindus in the section on religion in Chapter III of the Bihar District Gazetteer. The section 'Religion' of Chapter III (on 'People') reads as follows- 'Religion: Hindus including Scheduled Castes and Scheduled

tribes; Muslims, Christians, followers of other religions.' He requested the Minister of the Revenue Department, Government of Bihar, to look into the matter and forthwith to order a rectification in the revision of the Gazetteer.

Another leader was David Munzi, who also brought to the notice of the tribal intelligentsia the irregularities held in the recording of the tribals' identity in the Gazetteers. Munzi demanded an enquiry as to how the chapters on history and on the tribals were being revised, distorted and changed at will allegedly by the officers. He wanted to know on what basis the SC's and S.T.'s were clubbed together as Hindus. He was also against the view that tribal Christians are not Scheduled Tribes. He also requested that the decision of the Supreme Court on 6<sup>th</sup> March, 1968 legitimizing scheduled tribal status to the tribal Christians be included in the Ranchi District Gazetteers.

We also have to broadly understand how the issue of the religion of the tribals i.e. Animism and Hinduism was debated through the reports of Census operations. G.S. Ghurye has mentioned about the remarks made by various Census Officers regarding the similarity and differences between Tribal indigenous religion and Hinduism. Thus, he made a conclusion from the statements made by various census officers and mentioned that they were trying to distinguish the creed or creeds of certain tribes from the well-known religions of other Indians, sought to do so by using the term Animism. Yet from the very beginning they were aware of the difficulties, not only practical ones connected with obtaining an accurate return, but also more fundamental ones like the content and extent of the category. Moreover, in the light of the opinions and observations of the Census officers, the only sound conclusion is that the creeds of the so-called Animists and the Hinduism of some sections of Hindu society have so much material which is either similar or common or both, that demarcation between the two, being almost impossible, is thoroughly artificial.

Apart from these irregularities held in the recording of the tribal identity in Census and Gazetteers, there are some Hindutva forces who try to show the affinity between Sarna tribals and Hindus. They give examples of some rituals and traditions followed by the Sarnas that shows similarity between the Sarna tribals and Hinduism. For eg. Sarna participation in Hindu feasts like Shivrait and the Manda puja (feast of the Sadan Hindus). Majority of the Sarna Oraons were seen visiting the Shiva Temple, not only did the Oraons visit the temple, they also offered milk libation on the Shivalinga, besides fruits, flowers and sweets. The Oraon Sarnas devotedly participated in the puja rituals at the temple seeking the blessings of Lord Shiva. The way Oraon tribals did the worship, it became impossible to demarcate whether the Hindus or the tribals were offering the puja.

Another example was the debate among some of the Jharkhand Political leaders regarding the religion of the Tribals. While some BJP leaders insisted that the state's tribals are Hindus, the main opposition party at that time, the JMM, said that the stand of the BJP was an insult to the independent tribal identity. Babulal Marandi's alleged statement that 'tribals are Hindus and they worship Hindu Gods' sparked off sharp reactions. Some angry Santhal groups announced Marandi's boycott. The independence of the tribal religion was emphasized by the JMM and allies as opposed to the stance of Marandi. Ignoring the reactions of the Opposition leaders, Arjun Singh Munda, who was then Jharkhand Chief Minister, backed the view of his

predecessor on the basis of similarities between the tribal religion and Hinduism. He contended that the tribals had adopted Hindu ways of worship and that Hindu Gods were worshipped in many tribal festivals.

### **Contestation of Tribal identity by Christianity**

We also have to understand the ways in which the tribal identity has been contested by the Tribal Christian community in Jharkhand. In order to understand this, we need to closely examine the process of religious conversions into Christianity and the working of the Christian Missionaries among the tribals of Jharkhand. A large number of the tribals were converted into Christianity and by working amidst the tribals, the Christian Missions has always tried to identify itself with the tribal life and culture and by standing up for the cause of the tribal community. For eg. the Church has been supporting and reinforcing all the pro-tribal rallies openly. There were many demonstrations, rallies, bandhs and gheraos jointly organized by the Sarna tribals and the Christian tribals in Ranchi to press the demands for tribal rights. These demands centred around the issues of census irregularities, displacement, land alienation, reservations for tribals/indigenous people, prohibition on the infiltration of outsiders, restriction on the violation of the Chotanagpur Tenancy (CNT) Act and the Santhal Pargana Tenancy (SPT) Act, revaluation of the amendments of the Acts, teaching of the tribal languages in the educational institutions of Jharkhand, issuance of the domicile certificate on the basis of 1932 Khatiyans, etc.

Moreover, two major shifts in the stand of the Church are noticed in relation to its tribal identity articulation: A shift of focus from the western/Roman outlook to tribal/indigenous, and A shift from passivity to the Jharkhand Movement for a separate state to an active involvement in the post-independence period. Discussing the first shift we need to understand that previously when the Christian Missions were working amidst the tribals in Jharkhand, they used to have strong Western influence, and even prayers and hymns were in Latin. Slowly there has been Vernacularization and Indigenization. At the level of religion, the Church has articulated its identity as 'tribal' to thwart the idea that it is Roman, Western, and a religion imported from a foreign land. The process of indigenization in the Church put an end to the speculation about Church's going the western way. The Church also played an important role in the Jharkhand Movement. The various important Christian tribal political leaders and various political organizations formed by them played an active role in the separation of Jharkhand from Bihar and formation of a separate state of Jharkhand.

Thus, the effort of the Church is simple, namely, to show the tribal Christians as Adivasis and the Church as Adivasi. But the event of conversion, according to the detractors, has allegedly brought about a rupture in the community and caused loss of credibility and acceptability. This has been taken advantage of by the Hindutva forces, which are bent on delegitimizing the Christian community. But the church knows for sure that its acceptability by the Sarnas and others cannot come about without its tribalization. and the Church has been doing that so unassumingly that one does not even take notice of the negotiations going on in the day-to-day activities of the Church.

These were the contestation of tribal identity in Jharkhand by the major religious groups. Other than this, there are also recent examples of the efforts by the tribals fighting for their identity and rights in Jharkhand.

The tribals are campaigning to save Parasnath Hills, which they call Marang Buru, literally meaning the eldest mountain deity. The campaign is to not save it from industrial activity or government acquisition, but it's to save it from Jain community. The Parasnath Hills were in the news recently over its designation as a tourist spot and the resultant protests by Jains. The Union Government rolled back the decision, which pacified the Jain community, but soon the region's tribal community, the Adivasis began organising themselves over what they alleged to be encroachment of their space. While just one hillock is sacred to Jains, where there are around 30 Jain temples, the Adivasis say the entire Hill range is sacred to them. Traditionally the tribes in the region have worshipped nature, including mountains, forests and rivers. The tribals also allege that the Jain community has begun to dominate the region.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, these examples of contestation of tribal identity by various religious groups in the region of Jharkhand suggests that vast majority of the tribal community here follows one or the other organised religions. and the complex politics of tribal identity in Jharkhand reflects ongoing contestations from various religious groups. However, eminent anthropologist, Verrier Elvin, also advisor to former Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and architect of independent India's tribal policy, was against both isolation and assimilation of tribals. He was a great critic of both the 'Isolation' and 'Assimilation' approaches. For Elvin, assimilation is equivalent to 'Detribalization', and such a policy would suggest that 'Animism' should be replaced by the purer ideas of Christianity and Hinduism. He also mentioned that to categorise tribes as Hindus in India therefore smacks of cultural and religious expansionism. Just because there are some similarities, tribals cannot be denied their distinct identity and autonomy. It is important to note that religion does not only include practices. It also includes ideas and practices. It also includes ideas and beliefs. However, this is completely glossed over even by the sociologists and social anthropologists in their discussion and analysis of tribal religion. He notes that even when tribes get Hinduised, they retain a distinct identity and are often out of the Hindu caste structure. In fact, even after Hinduisation, tribes remain by and large outside the hierarchical structure of Hindu society. If at all tribes have made claims they have been made only after they have been drawn into the larger social structure of the neighbouring Hindu and Linguistic community. Theoretically it is possible to embrace a form of Hindu faith and practices without becoming part of Hindu society in the caste sense.

Moreover, in a recent Supreme Court decision, it mentioned that it wants to fix foolproof parameters to determine if a person belongs to a Scheduled Tribe and is entitled to the benefits due to the community. The Judiciary now is no longer sure about an "Affinity Test" used to shift through anthropological and ethnological traits to link a person to a Scheduled Tribe. There is the likelihood that contact with other cultures, migration and modernisation would have erased the traditional characteristics of a tribe. They might have developed new traits which may not essentially match with the traditional characteristics of the tribe, and this does not mean that they do not belong to Scheduled Tribe group.

Thus, by analysing these modes of contestation of tribal identity in Jharkhand, it can be argued that, 'Tribal Christians and tribal Hindus are as much a "Scheduled Tribe" as the Sarna Tribals, in Jharkhand.' There is

no loss of the tribal identity in dropping one's traditional tribal religion by converting to any religion, either individually or collectively. The tribal Christian and tribal Hindu community perceives itself as much a 'Scheduled Tribe' as the tribal Sarnas by virtue of its ethnic identity. In this regard Virginius Xaxa argues, "Despite the fact that tribes are in transition as in the case of Oraon tribe who speak various tongues and practice different religions, have a variety of occupations, etc. they continue being Oraons 'in some socially significant sense' without losing their distinctive identities."

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