
SOCIAL MOBILITY AMONG THE TRIBES: A CASE STUDY OF CHOTANAGPUR

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The integration of the adivasis into the social category of peasants is a widely debated phenomenon among the scholars and this development can be traced to earlier times under the process of 'peasantisation'. In other words it is a known fact, the Anthropologists and the Sociologists have studied the socio-cultural changes pervading the tribal heartland namely under two heads, traditional and modern resulting to the phenomenon of the upward social mobility of the tribes. The traditional processes is characterized by the influence of certain tradition of the major neighbouring communities on the tribal groups and have been in operation since long time and have been studied through concepts like 'Hinduisation', 'Sanskritisation', 'Tribe-Caste Continuum', 'Revitalisation', 'Bhagat Movements', etc, whereas the modern processes include Christianity, urbanization and industrialization. Sanskritisation was the route through which most of the adivasis embraced Hinduism. M.N. Srinivas describes Sanskritisation to be a process by which a 'low' Hindu caste or tribes or other group changes its customs, rituals, ideology and way of life of a high frequently 'twice-born' caste. Among the tribes, Sanskritisation results in tribe claiming to be a caste and therefore in the Hindu tradition system, the only way to become a Hindu was to belong to a caste, and the unit of mobility was usually a group, not an individual or a family.¹ A large number of tribes in India have transformed themselves into caste and became

sufficiently hinduised to be described as Hindu who do not maintain social contacts with higher castes. Tribes of central India like Gonds, Bhil, Bhumij, etc. qualify in this category.ⁱⁱ Prolonged contacts, sustained and continuous association with the regional Hindu castes, also resulted into the assimilation of some tribes like the Chero, the Gond and the Kherwar as rajputs in the traditional caste hierarchy. Thus, this is how the process of social mobility worked. For, e.g., the inhabitants of Oraon villages had long incorporating the worship of Hindu Gods and Goddesses, hiring Brahmin priest to officiate at religious function and some even gave up beef eating.ⁱⁱⁱ

The ancient, medieval, and early colonial Varna-Jati model of tribal integration has given way to a series of political movements initiated by a growing number of formally educated tribals.^{iv} The tribes have thus, emerged as politically and socially conscious regional and national minority groups through transformation during the colonial rule. The conversion of tribal by the Christian missionaries and the Hindu missionaries along with the consequent spread of the education among the adivasis paved the way for the rise of adivasi middle class which as the result of upward social mobility took leadership in the 20th century. Besides, the colonial administrators and the missionaries encouraged and employed those who received education at the mission schools. World War I and II provided ample employment opportunity to the adivasis. They were in great demand as labourer in and around the country, both as coolies in the tea gardens, combatants in the distant areas, etc.

The conversion of the adivasis by the Christian missionaries in Jharkhand was started in 1845 by the four missionaries sent out by Father Evangelist Johannes Gossner of Germany.^v They were initially able to convert four Oraons along with their families in 1850. By 1869 the number of

converts rose to about 11,000, when a split occurred among them leading to the establishment of the Anglican Church at Ranchi. This, however, did not affect the growth of the Lutheran Church as in 1909 they had 55,000 adherents in the same district.

The adivasis found an opportunity of taking revenge upon the government, which protected the moneylenders as well as outsiders referred as 'dikus' in local parlance. During the mutiny of 1857 the zamindars too settled their scores with the missionaries and their adivasis converts owing to the near-end of the age-old privilege of '*beth-begari*' (forced labour). The German Missionaries and their Indian converts were the worst sufferers. M.A. Sherring writes: "a good number of such people died on account of paucity of food and clothing in the jungle but none made shipwreck of his faith." Their exclamation was "Jab talak swas rahega main apne Isha ko nahi chhorunga" (As long as I have breath left, I shall never forsake my Jesus.)^{vi}

With the restoration of British authority in Chotanagpur, the Christian missionaries also returned to Ranchi and took up the conversion programme with great vigour. They were given all encouragement by the administration which now concerted on the policy of 'divide and rule' and aimed to create a class of converts among the tribes, who would look to the British to endorse their interest and, hence, would stand aloof from any movement in future. In general, the missionaries harped on the theme of social and cultural differences between the Hindu and the adivasis and pointed out that the society was essentially backward, idolatrous, polytheistic, superstition-ridden oppressive and looked down upon the adivasis in contrast to the attitude of the benevolent, progressive Christian European civilisation.^{vii} Although the Christian conversion tended to uproot the adivasis from their traditional norms and linkages with the surroundings non-adivasi peasantry,

but at the same time it also provided a wider basis for developing tribal unity and separate identity in contrast to what was observed in their traditional past. The tribes resented the destruction of their agrarian and forest rights by the British officials and their own countrymen whom they termed '*dikus*' and '*khatta khurus*'. At the same time, the Christianization of the adivasis and the destruction of their aboriginal culture made non-Christian adivasis apprehensive of proselytizing design of the Christian missionaries. After the revolt of 1857, the spread of Christianity was very fast owing to the impression rapidly gaining ground that to become Christian was the best way of shaking off the oppression of the landlords.^{viii}

The first Jesuit in Chotanagpur, in the beginning settled at Chaibasa in 1869. The history of Roman Catholic mission is in fact closely associated with the name of Father Constant Lievens and he has been considered as the greatest missionary like St. Francis Xavier on account of his amazingly large apostolate in Chotanagpur. In other words, it was only with the coming of Father Lievens that conversion adivasis began on a large scale. He defended them in law courts against the zamindars during the agrarian turbulence resulting in their popularity among the adivasis. Another reason for the popularity of the Catholic Church was that it took a more tolerant and progressive view of the traditional tribal habits of dancing and drinking and did not insist on commensality with Christians not belonging to one's own tribe. Besides, it was sheer desperation to seek protection against economic exploitation that brought the adivasis to the Catholic Church. These works won for him the title of "the Apostle of the Oraons."^{ix} In his efforts to gain justice for his converts, he did not alienate the British government, and he was successful in securing the goodwill of the British authorities. Christianisation thus flagged way for social mobility.

In context to Christianisation, it would be pertinent to point out some of the main methods employed by the missionaries, along with their evangelical and benevolent works in converting the people, was also coercion. A handful of aboriginals might have been genuinely moved by the preaching of Christianity, no doubt, but for a majority of them it was not the preaching, but protection and defence from landlords and other such privileges, that motivated them to enter the Christian fold.^x Even converts would also join them in harassing their non-Christian brethren to accept Christianity.^{xi} Grimley's and Renny's official documents also substantiate this point: "the Christian missionaries often went beyond the scope of their priestly function." Thus, the conversion was not 'the act of individual will moved by the Grace of God' but it was material and other non-religious considerations that motivated at least the majority of the tribals to become Christians.^{xii}

The process of Christianisation was not unchallenged and Birsa Munda's action is testimony to it. During the next great rising of 1895 under leadership of Birsa Munda, he not only renounced Christianity, wore sacred thread, put sandal paste on forehead worshipped Tulsi plant, prohibited cow-slaughter, read Hindu scriptures but also emphasized austerity, purity, and piety. He asked his people to defy the authorities, informing them that the 'Raj' of Maharani was over and the 'Munda Raj' had begun. He was arrested and imprisoned. On his release from the jail, Birsa soon organized the uprising of 1899-1900 on the eve of Christmas in 1899. It was directed against the Christians who were terrorised into joining hands their rebel kinsmen at various places like Khunti, Tamar, Basia, and Ranchi thana.^{xiii} In fact, process of 'Hinduisation' was also another dimension of social mobility among the tribals of Chotanagpur.

The post-Birsa period witnessed the rise of politically conscious adivasi middle class and a number of socio-political associations were formed cutting across the religious beliefs and in this process of social mobility role of education was immense. As early as in 1898, the Chotanagpur Christian Association was formed by the Lutheran graduates with an objective to improve political and economic conditions and promote education.^{xiv} There also existed smaller philanthropic groups but they started with narrow denominational base.^{xv} In 1917 the Chotanagpur Students Union was formed by the Christian College students of Chotanagpur studying at Calcutta with an objective to persuade the adivasis for college education. The Christian associations eventually merged with one another to form a viable organisation which cut across the difference of race, caste and religion.^{xvi} In 1918 the Catholics also joined it to form Christian College Union. The Christian Students Conference of Chotanagpur was formed which opened its branches at different places and in it J. Bartholman, a student of St. Columba's College, Hazaribagh, took a lead in organising the conference. He remained in constant touch with Christian Students' Organisation of Bengal and attended Dacca Students' Conference in 1911-12. This organisation was short-lived but remained successful in bringing unity of the Lutherans and the Anglican students.^{xvii}

The spread of education was the handiwork of the British administration, the Christian missionaries and some of the enlightened individuals of Chotanagpur thus they paved the way for growing consciousness and strengthening of pan-tribal sentiments. K.S. Singh opines that a new sentiment was in the air: "All Adivasis are one, Adivasis of lower category such as Lohars, Panre, Bhuiya and Tamaria should not be looked down upon", etc.^{xviii} However, the pan-tribal sentiment was weak at that time.

The Munda-Oraon Education Conference (Shiksha Sabha) was formed in 1912 by Theble Oraon, a non-Christian leader. The Ranchi Union did the job of promoting education among the urban aboriginals. In the same year Chotanagpur Charitable Association was formed by all aboriginals Christians and non-Christians alike with Samuel Purti as its President to raise funds to provide scholarship for students. It also emphasised the unity of all adivasis and inter-dining and inter-marriages among them, a step further strengthening the process of social mobility.

When the era of constitutional reform dawned, the demand for the promotion and protection of regional sectarian interests grew.^{xix} The Lutheran and Anglican adivasis organized Chotanagpur Unnati Samaj at the instance of Bishop Kennedy of Anglican Mission, Ranchi in 1915, in which Anand Masih Topno and Alfonse Kujur took the leading role in the formation of the Samaj. It demanded employment for the educated adivasis, reservation in services and legislative bodies and the formation of a sub-state joined to Bengal or Orissa.^{xx} This Anglican-Lutheran body voiced its concern in 1916 over the "absence of security for the tribals and stressed the need for the preservation of tribal identity in the changing political context of Montford Reforms and urged that aboriginal of Chotanagpur may be left to the administration of European Office."^{xxi}

The Society offered various suggestions for economic advancement of the tribal community but it became moribund. However, it was revived in 1920 in which C.P. Kachchap Rai Saheb Bandiram Oraon and Alfonse Kujur were elected as its President, Secretary and Treasurer respectively. Its objectives were propagated through a magazine "Adivasi" which was published in Hindi, English, Kurukh and Mundari. The society revived the 'parha' village assembly, discovered

the lost 'script' and drew the attention of the authorities to the problems of the tribes. It is significant to note, here, that all early Christian organisations took up the issue of social mobility seriously and they encouraged the spread of education among the tribes and granted scholarship to the students.

When the Simon Commission visited Ranchi in December 1928 Bishop Van Hoeck and Joel Lakra met the Commission and submitted a memorandum which sought to secure employment opportunities for educated adivasis, reservation for them in the government services and the legislative bodies, etc. and proposed that Chotanagpur together with the Santal Parganas and the district of Sambalpur be formed into a separate province or sub-province with a more direct and paternal form of administration.^{xxii} The memorandum further sought for amendments in the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act and establishment of an aboriginal regiment at Ranchi manned and staffed purely by aborigines.^{xxiii}

The Unnati Samaj was dominated by the Lutherans and Anglicans and hence the Christian missionaries interfered freely in its affairs. This was resented by the non-converts right from the very beginning. Ultimately, they split from the Samaj and formed the Chotanagpur Kisan Sabha in 1931 with Laurentius Barla and Theble Oraon as its elected President and Secretary respectively. It aimed at improving the condition of peasantry and creating better relationship between them and their landlords. Theble Oraon was a nationalist leader and sided with the Congress in their struggle against British rule. During the Civil Disobedience Movement, Theble Oraon and other prominent Tana Bhagats advised the adivasis of Ranchi district not to pay for the Survey and Settlement cost to the government.

The advent of Simon Commission in Ranchi surcharged the political atmosphere of Chotanagpur and prompted the Catholics to form an organisation called the Chotanagpur Catholic Sabha in 1928-29 at the suggestion of Rev. Surin, Archbishop of Chotanagpur to conduct their political activities, with Bonface Lakra and Ignis Beck as its President and its Secretary respectively. It was organised at the level of all parish throughout Chotanagpur and contested provincial assembly election of Bihar in 1937. At the poll of 1937, the Chotanagpur Catholic Sabha's two candidates were elected while other adivasi organisations failed miserably in it. The aboriginal Mundas also made their presence felt in Chotanagpur politics in 1929 by forming the Munda Sabha but it could not carry on its activities too far. Here its important to note that the process of social mobility not only gave them a social status but also awakened them politically. It can be seen in the political activities in the period of our study especially in the demand put forward in 1929 by S.C. Roy, an ideologue for separation of Chotanagpur from Bihar. At the same time the Lutherans and Anglicans also demanded "Greater Chotanagpur", but it was rejected by the Commission.

In 1930s, there was an increased activity of Arya Samajists and their anti-Christian campaign in Chotanagpur under the leadership of Pt. Dharmvir Vidyalkar, the secretary of All India Swami Shraddhanand Trust, Delhi, Jagat Narayan Lal, Chandradeo Narayan, the secretary of Bihar Nabajubak Society, and Chandrika Prasad. In Khunti and Lohardaga the All-India Shraddhanand Trust had many schools. In 1935 they had decided to open twenty primary schools for adivasis and depressed classes.^{xxiv} Observing the deplorable condition of the adivasis and the ongoing conversion of them at an alarming rate, these Hindu leaders visited Lohardaga, Ranchi,

Khuti, Gawan, Daltongarij, Garhwa, Chandwa, Balumath, etc. Although the Arya Samajits increased their activities, yet missionaries like Father Delveux, a Roman Catholic in-charge of Chandwa p.s., one of the most enthusiastic proselytizers, converted about 700 adivasis in a span of two months, mainly by the incentive of a loan from his Catholic Co-operative Bank. In response to this issue, it was suggested..., it should not be difficult for Chandrika Prasad and his associates to reconvert them by promises of more money.^{xxv} The Catholic - Hindu Mahasabha rivalry assumed a political tinge and had serious political repercussion. The Mahasabha alleged that the government had discarded their policy of religious neutrality.^{xxvi}

Apart from the conversion of the adivasis to Christianity and Hinduism resulting in improvement their social status and worldview, the role of western education is also integral to it. The system of modern western education was introduced in Jharkhand by the British government and the Christian missionaries in the Nineteenth century, resulting in the opening of large number of primary schools and high schools in and around Ranchi district. The development of collegiate education in Chotanagpur, however, was extremely slow. The first college was opened by the Dublin Mission at Hazaribagh in 1899, named St. Columba's College. Ranchi College was established much later, in 1946. The Santal Parganas (hereafter the SPs) remained completely devoid of collegiate education till the independence.

Thus two significant factors namely, the conversion of adivasis to the Christianity and Hinduism and the spread of western education, were responsible for enhancing the mental horizon, changing their worldview, and awakening the political consciousness among the adivasis in the early twentieth century. The enlightened Christian adivasis came out as the torch-bearer of the

adivasi society and tried their level best to improve the social and educational level of their brethren. Even K.S. Singh opines: "as Christianity spread, it performed many roles, it gave them a history and a myth, it accentuated the notion of private rights in land, it promoted education and medical care, it emphasized a sense of separateness from the rest."^{xxvii}

Chotanagpur witnessed the arrival of national leaders of the Indian National Congress, their strategy, programme and policies to fight British raj after 1920. One of the strategies adopted by them was of social assimilation as well as recognition and it had positive impact in context to local politics. There developed a new set of local leaders who certainly made their presence felt among the adivasis and influenced them in a positive way. In December 1922, the Gaya session of Indian National Congress gave them a golden opportunity to understand very closely socio-political aspirations of the adivasis. About 400 of them came to Gaya walking the whole distance on foot.^{xxviii} A large number of them joined the Non-Cooperation movement and appealed to the adivasis not to pay chaukidari tax to the government. Mahatma Gandhi visited Chotanagpur in 1924 and 1927 during the Constructive programme (1924-29) of the Congress and addressed several public meetings. He made acquaintance with the adivasis and was very much impressed by their simplicity. They gave up drinking and adopted 'charkha' and 'Khaddar'. Gandhiji appreciated the Christian missionaries for their services to the adivasis and the schools run by them. However, he felt that it would have been nice if the Christian missionaries rendered humanitarian services without the ulterior aim of conversion. Here it's important to note, around 1929, Bangam Manghi, claiming to be a disciple of Gandhiji, organised the Santals of Gomia and started the *Janeodhari* movement like a high caste Hindu. It was also an act of social mobility.

With the Congress ministry coming to power in 1937-39, the adivasis aspiration multiplied and the divide and rule policy of the British bore fruits owing to the demands and activities of the Adivasi Mahasabha. The separatism grew among the Bengalis and the Muslims residing in Chotanagpur in order to dominate the affairs of Chotanagpur and the SPs. Later on, the Muslim League provided their support to the Adivasi Mahasabha for the separation of Chotanagpur and the SPs and making them a new Governor's province. A deputation of non-Christian adivasis including Narayan Khalkho, Tikaram Manjhi, MLA, Hopna Manjhi, MLA, Ram Bhagat, MLA, Dwarka Prasad Kasap and Mukul Ram Pahan met the Premier of Bihar, Shrikrishna Sinha, who inaugurated Special Ameliorative Schemes^{xxix} for the adivasis and promised better contacts in future with the people of Chotanagpur. On the other hand, the Congress leadership remained unsuccessful in either satisfying the adivasi demands in general or politically eclipse the ambitions of Jaipal Singh and prevent him from becoming a towering personality and national leader of the adivasis in the years to come. Jaipal Singh easily got the support of dissatisfied and disgruntled elements and opponents of the Congress like the Bengalis of Chotanagpur and the SPs, the Christian missionaries and their educated converts, the Muslim League, etc. However, the non-Christian adivasis remained loyal to the Congress

The period between 1930 and 1947 witnessed the interplay of diverse interests in Chotanagpur and the SPs represented by the separatist elements on the one hand and by the Tana Bhagats, the Sanatan Adivasis, the Kherwars, the Janeodhari Santal and other nationalists Paharas, Ho, Bhumij, Kherias, etc. The adivasis also resented the modes of census operations by which their percentage in population dwindled sharply in the Census Reports of 1921, 1931 and 1941. Census

Reports of 1921 and 1931 held hinduisation of the adivasis responsible for the erosion of adivasi identity in terms of displacement of adivasi by the non-adivasi languages and growth of bilingualism among the adivasis living in the area of culture contact.

Although the social mobility and acculturation improved their position in the society to a greater extent, still they were passionate about their tradition and culture. The language and script-based movements, revival of art and literature and the cultural advancement were all part of movements to define and assert adivasi identity. These movement cantered in the area of high adivasi concentration where the adivasi voiced their mother tongue. K.S. Singh opines that the discovery of a script is thus part of a whole process of reforms, revivalism and revitalization of tribal culture.^{xxx}

It is significant to note here that besides educated Christians and non- Christians, the participation of educated tribal women significantly increased with the beginning of separatist movement and it is also an important aspect of the adivasis aspiring for social mobility. The Adivasi Mahasabha had a Mahila Sangh, which was headed by Mrs. Hanna Bodra. Other prominent leaders were Mrs. Ashishit Minz, Mrs. Hagdali Aind. Ms. Magdali Barla, Mrs. Ashrita Toppo, Mrs. Kerketta of Singhbhum, Mrs. Debura Tudu, Mrs. Elish Lakra and Mrs. Jayanti Bodra. These women leaders appealed to the adivasi women to participate in the meetings of Adivasi Mahasabha with their bows and arrows. During 1946-47, in some of the meetings of Adivasi Mahasabha the women responded overwhelmingly and participated in large numbers.

To sum up, the British raj and the advent of Christianity in Chotanagpur changed the character and composition of the adivasi society in the nineteenth and the twentieth century. On one hand it created a permanent mental division among the adivasi society into two broad sections - Christian and non-Christian population, on the other hand, the process of Hinduisation of the adivasis (which began from time immemorial) continued in the areas of culture contact through varna-jati model, process of kshatriasation and sanskritisation, etc. However, the introduction of western system of education had a catalytic effect on the adivasi society, resulting in cultural advancement, growth of political consciousness, and at the same time emergence of an educated job-oriented class that wanted to throw away yoke of their poverty, hunger, despair and exploitation by the 'dikus'. While the Christians remained loyal to the British government and the Christian missionaries, started a separatist movement within the constitutional framework, the non-Christian adivasis initiated revivalist movements with political undercurrents and eventually backed the nationalist movement after 1920. Whatever may be the consequence of these developments, it is significant to note that it paved the way for the growth of adivasi middle class through the process of upward social mobility.

End Notes

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- ii Nadeem Husain, *Tribal India*, 1991, New Delhi, p. 325.
- iii Sachchidanand, *Cultural Change in Tribal Bihar*, Calcutta, 1964 June 1981, p.
- iv Surajit Sinha. 'Tribes and Indian Civilisation: Transformation Processes in Modern India', *Man in India*, 105.
- v K.N. Sahay, *Christianity and Culture Change in India*, 1986, pp. 230-23.

- vi M. A. Sherring, *The Indian Churches during the great rebellion*, pp.312-313.
- vii Surajit Sinha, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
- viii ET Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Government of Bengal Press, 1872.
- ix *Ranchi District Gazetteer*, 1917, p.47?
- x *Ibid.*, p.118.
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- xvi L.N. Rana, 'Political Consciousness in Jharkhand (1900-1947)', *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, 1996, p. 473.
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- xviii K.S. Singh, *Tribal Society of India*, p.197.
- xix L.N. Rana, *op. cit.*, p. 474.
- xx K.S. Singh, 'Presidential Address, The Colonial transformation of the tribal society', *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*, 1977, p. 394
- xxi Address not formally presented, Appendix XI presented in India to His Excellency the secretary of state for India, East vol. XVIII, cited in K.S. Singh, *Tribal Society in India*, p.199.
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- xxv *Ibid.*
- xxvi The Indian Nation, 30 August 1935.
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- xxviii *The Searchlight*, 24 December 1922.
- xxix Balmiki Chaudhary, *Dr. Rajendra Prasad: Correspondence and Select Documents*, Vol. II, pp. 310-315, Vol. III, pp. 311-314.
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