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Christian Faith and Tribal Culture: Crisis, Negotiations and Convergence Joseph Marianus Kujur, S.J.

Crisis in the Tribal Church of Jharkhand

The alleged distortion of the tribal culture by the Church has been a regional debate for quite some time in the present state of Jharkhand.¹ In 1995 some *adivasi* leaders of a village in Ghaghra, Gumla district, convened a meeting to which the bishops and other leaders of the Church too were invited. Representatives of other denominations, including the retired Lutheran Bishop, Dr. Nirmal Minj, were also present at the meeting. In spite of the political overtones of the meeting, "tribal unity across religious lines," was the main agenda. There was a criticism that the minority tribal Christians of some villages did not toe the traditional tribal line in safeguarding their own culture. It was alleged that Christians did not abstain from work on Thursdays, which for the *adivasis*, as the organizers of the meet claimed, was a 'sabbath' day. It was also pointed out that Christians, while celebrating the tribal festivals in the church, disregarded the usual ritual. The celebration of the feast of *karam*² among the Christians in the recent past has drawn flak

¹ After a struggle of over 50 years by the tribes, the new state of Jharkhand finally came into existence on 15 November 2000. More than expressing a mere geographical identity, Jharkhand epitomizes the dreams, hopes and aspirations of the tribes for equality, justice and dignity. Administratively Jharkhand was the most southern part of Bihar before its separation from it. The Jharkhand movement for a separate state, which initially started as a tribal movement, went through many ups and downs.

² A feast celebrated among the tribes of central India on the 11th day of *Bhadro* (August-September). Traditionally, boys and girls keep fast until the *karam* branches are respectfully planted in the *akhra* (dancing yard) of the village. They watch over the branches in the *akhra* all through the night after listening to the myth of *karam raja* (king) and immerse them during the day.

from the *sarna*³ intellectuals in Ranchi, the state capital. Dr. K. Oraon, a university professor turned politician, when invited as the Chief Guest at the *karam* celebration in one of the prestigious Christian colleges in Ranchi, was extremely critical of the way it was being celebrated. He raised objections to the way *karam* branches were brought in, planted, and then disposed off after the celebration. Outside the *sarna* intellectual circles, too, there have been reports of objections by the simple, illiterate but conscientious tribals to the church celebrations of *karam*. *Hindutva* forces make the issue more complex for they arouse anti-Christian feelings among otherwise tolerant and peace-loving tribals. So powerful are the objections that many parish priests do not want to take the risk of celebrating the *karam* feast as before, and face the wrath of the *sarna* community. They have now, in fact, created a shift in the stand of the Church. It recommends only the *karam* mass in church and requests participation in the other celebrations of the village along with the *sarna* people. This shift has created confusion in the minds of the local Christians who were until recently forbidden even to witness the *adivasi* dance in the *akhra*. It has taken the Christian laity long way to get readjusted and to revert to the tribal customs. To the various attempts of participating in the lives of the *sarna* people and their festivals, some elite *adivasis* have questioned thus: "If the Church has forbidden us to celebrate tribal festivals in the past why does she want us to do so now?"

In the Christian adaptation of the *karam* feast the branches are ushered in the church by dancing maidens in an entrance procession along with the priests. The branches are then planted in a tin or a container where a cross is also planted alongside, signifying the 'karam-cross' as bringing salvation to humankind. There is a marked difference between the ways in which the *sarna* and the Christian communities celebrate the feast.

³ A generic name for the traditional religions of the tribes, mainly in Jharkhand. The communities of these tribes may be called 'sarna' and their members 'sarna people'. There are now political overtones to the use of the term 'sarna'. Dr. Ram Dayal Munda advocates the idea of Constitutional recognition of one general *Adidharmi* (religion from time immemorial) for tribals, a religion different from other religions recognized by the Government of India. He opines that the *Adidharm* is manifested in various religions *Adidharm Sarna*, *Adidharm Gond*, *Adidharm Bhoi*, etc. See R. Munda, *Adidharm* (Ranchi: Jharkhand prakashan, 2000) 4.

In the early pre-independence days of conversion there was resistance in some quarters to the tribals changing their religious affiliations to Christianity. There was, however, no such intensive opposition as seen today unleashed by the Hindu fanatics. Even among the *sarna* tribals there is a deepening consciousness now about their religious, social and cultural identity. In the assertion of their rights as 'sarna' tribes, there is an articulation of their religious identity that had long been neglected even by the census enumerators who did not give a separate column for their religion and clubbed them with the Hindu religion instead.⁴ Even in the local Church of Jharkhand, the process of adaptation and inculturation after Vatican II received a setback⁵ after it was alleged by some *sarna* people that it was misleading people with wrong interpretations, and unconventional, casual and christianized ways of celebrating tribal festivals, especially the feast of *karam*.

The present paper, while exploring the inter-relations between the Christian faith and tribal culture, looks at the confusion in their encounter, discusses the process and progress of negotiations among the two, and analyzes the dialectic between them.

Faith-Culture Discourse in its Proper Perspective Encounter of Two Alien Cultures

The colonization of India was an act of political aggression. The side effects of this process of culture contact were psychological, sociological, cultural, and religious as well.⁶ Christianity came to Jharkhand along with colonization. Being an alien culture Christianity had an encounter with the local worldviews, ethos, values, systems and patterns of behaviour.

Theories of simple societies (tribal societies) living in total isolation are contested today. Even if a society were to be fully

⁴ S. Kadwar & A. Ekka, *Bharatiya Jangam-na Aur Jharkhandi Adivasi* (Ranchi: Jharkhand Nawmiran Sabha, 2001) 1-38.

⁵ Agapit Tirkey, "Inculturating the Christian Message among the Tribals of Chotanagpur," *Kristu Jyoti* 17/1 (March 2001) 54-64.

⁶ K. N. Sahay, *Christianity and Culture Change in India* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1986) 81-111.

isolated there would be change from within if not from outside. In the tribal belt of Chotanagpur there were many such processes of social change as education, industrialization, westernization, urbanization, and so on. Conversion was only one such process. It is true that conversion to Christianity provided a scope to the native population to benefit from the missionary schools that came up like mushrooms. But it will be wrong to say that the Church alone was responsible for the tribals' alienation from their own culture. Many of Church's ideologies, policies and views in the past were anti-tribal, and it looked down upon the faith and practice of the tribals as 'superstitious', 'pagan' and as 'devil's work'. An example is this excerpt from Veys:

Their religion, or rather their superstitions are much the same. They are all Animists and offer sacrifices of fowls, goats and in great exigencies a buffalo, to the innumerable spirits that (according to them) inhabit homes and villages, fields and groves, rivers, mountains and forests. Any deformed and solitary tree, a curiously shaped lonely rock is said to be a special haunt of spirits. The people avoid these places; fine fields are often abandoned because of some such uncanny tree or rock, and fish batten and multiply in those mysterious pools under the aegis of the devil! Our Christians have often reaped good harvests from fields that their pagan brethren dared not touch; and our schoolboys have had many a fat fish from the devil's pool.⁷

On the other hand, it is also true that if much of the tribal culture has been documented and preserved today, it is largely due to the Catholic, Anglican and Lutheran missionaries.⁸ No one has contributed to the progress of the tribals in areas of education, political consciousness, self-dignity, etc., as much as Christianity. Nevertheless, owing to the differences between the two cultures, there were continuous processes of adjustments and accommodations that paved the way for the prevailing ethos in a tribal-Christian community.

⁷ M. Veys, *Vocies from India* (Calcutta: Bengal Mission, 1923) 5.

⁸ S. Malto, *Hundred Years of Christian Missions in Chotanagpur since 1845* (Ranchi: The Chotanagpur Christian Publishing House, 1971).

Emergence of a New Religious Community

Conversion to Christianity resulted in the emergence of a new religious community called 'Tribal Christians' with double identity — one as Christian, loyal to Rome if Catholics, to England if Anglicans, to Germany if Lutherans, and the other, simultaneously as tribal, loyal to the tribe to which one ethnically belonged. Before their conversion the *sarna* tribals had loyalty to the *sarna* faith and the tribal society. Now their religious loyalty has seen a radical change but their ethnic loyalty persists. This is complex, as religious, social and ethnic identities cannot be compartmentalized, and this more so in a tribal context. But the fact remains that there is an emergence of a new community of 'tribal Christians' who are very much tribal socially, but not religiously. The 'tribal religiosity' continues among the converts even after their conversion, but it is no smooth sailing. The Christian tribals have rights and duties as Christians on the one hand, and as tribals, on the other. But the *sarna* tribals have rights and duties only as tribals and not as Christians. Hinduized tribals, too, had their double identities as Hindus and as tribals. Tribals are not "backward Hindus" as claimed by Ghurye.⁹ Tribals, too, can be Hinduized as much as they can be Christianized or Islamized. Conversion to Christianity in Chotanagpur way back in 1845 and in the subsequent years had far-reaching demographic, religious, spiritual and political repercussions.

The fusion of Christian faith and tribal culture creates a lot of confusion. A discourse on Christian faith and tribal culture necessarily takes into consideration the problematic of the encounter between the two. The Church, as an alien force trying to enter into the life and belief of the *sarna* faith, causes the emergence of a new religious community. In the process there is a constant shaping and re-shaping of faith and practices. Tribal culture has a typical way of perceiving reality, its own thought-pattern, and practices determined by its belief system. The tribal system of belief, knowledge, and the construction of the self in relation to the tribal

⁹ G. S. Ghurye, *The Schedule Tribes* (Bombay: Popular, 1963).

community, etc., are absorbed by each tribal. He/she experiences tribal solidarity. This experience is transmitted from one generation to another. Hence Christianity, in the garb of western culture, is soon in conflict with the tribals in relation to their attitude to nature, economy, social organization, politics, art, literature, music, religion, and philosophy.¹⁰ The problem of the 'outsider-insider' receives a further dimension: there is already a clash of tribal and western attitudes; now, there is a clash between tribal groups and Christian tribal groups.

Interaction among Communities

The tribe and caste equations in a village are sure to get affected if a sizeable population changes its religious affiliation. The aspersions 'untouchability' to and the discrimination against the converts by their own tribal society prove the point that the converts are no more the same as they used to be. There are difficulties experienced by the new community in terms of commensality and communitability. But as far as the inheritance of property, customary law and legal rights are concerned there is a status quo. Economic status plays an important role in socially accepting or rejecting the converts. If the new converts are educated and well off, they become role models for the rest of the village despite their religious 'deviation'. In the beginning there may be ostracism, either officially or unofficially, but slowly it lessens to extinction and the converts become as much a part of tribal society as any others except for their new religious beliefs and practices.

Faith-Culture Dialectics: Interrelations between Christian Faith and Tribal Culture

Faith does not exist in a vacuum. It is expressed in and through one's own culture. The Christian faith may find its expression in western, eastern, Russian, Chinese, Indian, tribal, cultures and so on. Tribal faith, on the other hand, finds its expression in a particular

¹⁰ Mathew Areeparampil, *Abua Raj: Swaraj ke liye Jharkhandiyon ka Sangharsh, Ek Sanskriti Itihas* [Hindi translation by Basil Camil Horo and Sita Ram Shashtri] (Chaubasa: Tribal Research and Training Centre, 2000) 13-4.

tribal culture. No culture is static. Culture is dynamic and progressive. There have been constant influences on each culture, either from within or from without. Some changes are deliberate, others unplanned. But the fact is that cultures do get modified and also modify other cultures they come in contact with. When two alien cultures encounter one another, there are bound to be culture shocks, conflicts, confusion and chaotic experiences. At the same time there are likely to be experiences of compatibility, integration, negotiation and reconciliation.

Some studies have shown how a dominant culture, Hinduism, Christianity or Islam, has influenced the 'little' culture of 'simple' societies. Other studies have dealt with how a local culture affects the alien. But a holistic study deals with the dialectics between the two. In a fusion of the two there is a crisis. When Christianity, for instance, has an impact in the fields of religion, education, modernization and westernization, the tribal culture, too, affects the ideology of the Church in terms of her theology, structure and liturgical expressions. Adaptation, accommodation, assimilation, absorption, go both ways, and the values of one culture intersect with those of the other.

Interrelations

There seems to be the denial of "faith" to what is connected with tribal religion. Some speak in terms of "religion" and "religiosity"¹¹ or of "tribal worship"¹² or "Sarna worship"¹³ or of "tribal cultures".¹⁴ But nobody seems to talk of "tribal faith". There was a time when everything tribal was regarded as 'superstitious' and hence one could not talk of tribal faith. Faith was considered to be the monopoly of major religions only. Times have changed and

¹¹ Tarunoday Regional Theologate, "Reflections on 'Sarna Religion,'" 1983.

¹² A. Parapullil, "Tribal Theology," *Sevartham* 2 (1977) 47.

¹³ A. Bruggemann, "Worship: Sarna and Christian: Theological Reflections on the Munda Ba-parab," *Sevartham* 7 (1982) 45.

¹⁴ Agapit Tirkey, "Christianity Meets Tribals in Chotanagpur," *Sevartham* 23 (1998) 31.

tribals are now considered to have as much "faith" as in that of religions in other cultures.

Christian and tribal faiths are a result of a God-experience. There is only one faith, both in Christianity and in tribal religion. However, the faith-experience can be expressed in various religious languages. In Christianity, for instance, the expressions of belief are culled from sacred scriptures, dogmas, liturgy, etc.¹⁵ Unlike in tribal society that has only oral tradition to go by. The tribals express their faith through myths, legends and rituals. In tribal society the processes of assimilation and transmission of beliefs, and the processes of initiating the members into the tribe and training them in the ways of the tribe, are done through socialization and re-socialization. In earlier times *dhumkuria* (youth dormitory) served this purpose, contrary to the false notion of some anthropologists that it was a den of promiscuity. In Christianity, religious education in forms of catechesis, theological teaching, and Christian praxis, facilitated the process of the assimilation of beliefs.¹⁶ There are always some beliefs in the Church and in tribal society that are widely accepted. Unlike the officially approved doctrines and dogmas of the Church,¹⁷ the tribal society transmits its beliefs from one generation to another by word of mouth, for instance, about the worship of one God and appeasement of the spirits. But the personal devotion to certain deities is left to the discretion of the individuals in the same way as some beliefs in Church are held by only a few individuals and are not universally accepted.¹⁸

Christian Attitude to Tribal Faith and a Response

The post Vatican II Church has definitely shown appreciation for native cultures. The Church's attitude of superiority in the past has given way to an increasing recognition that there can be a convergence of tribal culture and Christian faith.

¹⁵ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, vol. 1 (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1980) 23-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

In spite of the strong criticism of the missionaries for allegedly distorting tribal culture, one needs to understand the context within which they were operating. As westerners, the missionaries found it very strange and unproductive to see the tribals dancing in the *akhra* the whole night long and not being able to work in the morning or sometimes even for days if the celebrations were on for the whole week. The question of morality was also their prime concern. If the young boys and girls danced all through the night there were occasions for illicit sexual relations. *Dhumkuria* was a centre for teenage education and not a place for free sex. It provided the young a learning or training ground for agricultural, religious, social, cultural, sexual and other aspects of tribal education. If the missionaries saw all this as a centre for immoral activities it was the Victorian outlook that influenced them. The Church now encourages the positive aspects of the youth dormitory.

As far as the belief system is concerned, the tribal mind tries to explain everything from a "spirit-world" perspective. For tribals the *bhoots* (spirits) are both good and bad. The good *bhoots* were propitiated to avoid any misfortune. After conversion there appears to be a total renunciation of the 'spirit-world'. But in fact with the new religious affiliation one kind of spirit-world is replaced by another, with the Supreme Spirit of Singbonga and Dharmes, by the Spirit of Jesus, and by the spirits of Mother Mary, the saints, and angels — the last being spiritual beings. Hence in the life of the new tribal Christians there is no vacuum but a continuum. They find old meanings in their new religion and in the new relationships created by it. There is a growing awareness of the similarity of values, such as communion, sharing, and reverence for life in both the faiths.

There are many differences between *sarna* and Christianity about the afterlife and salvation, the understanding about saints and ancestors, love of God, prayer, concept of sin, evil, and suffering, magic and witchcraft. It is also noted that joy felt in Christianity is not experienced in the *sarna*. Between Christianity and tribal culture also there are differences about the appeasement of the deities, and about the ultimate meaning of life. But all the

same it cannot be denied that the *sarna* is God's way of giving a tribal the truth.¹⁹

Revealed Religion and Natural Religion

If the sources and expressions of both the religions are so different can there ever be a convergence between the two? One is highly systematic, structured, written down and dogmatic. The other is descriptive, loosely structured and depends on tradition. It is interesting to see the way in which they respond to each other. For Christians their religion has a final revelation in Jesus Christ, for Muslims it is in Mohammed. For tribals the experience of God is found in the powers of nature – in the sun that gives life, warmth and light. The rising and the setting of the sun reminds them of God being present in their lives. This God-experience is expressed through nature. But religions whether revealed or natural, have the same belief in the One Supreme Being. Even revealed religion seeks natural expressions in the context of the tribals. On the feast of *karam*, for instance, it is the experience of liberation from all evil that gives hope to the people in the midst of suffering. Even natural religion accommodates the Christ-figure, the mediator, at the helm of the hierarchy of beings.

Animism and Christianity

One major difficulty of Christianity with regard to tribal religion was that it thought it to be 'animistic', that is, with a belief in the existence of spirits in animate and inanimate beings or independently. The principle of animism is based on two premises: one, that there is an existence of powerful souls besides powerful gods, and that the souls are related with human beings and feel pleasure and pain through them, and that they even influence various events; two, that there is the survival of the soul of human beings even after their death. Since the religion of tribals is thought to be 'natural', they are considered to be 'nature worshippers'. But tribals, in fact, go beyond the natural symbols of sun, moon, rivers, stone, rocks, trees and branches. Anyone making superficial observations

¹⁹ Tarunoday Regional Theologate, "Reflections on 'Sarna Religion'", 8-9.

of the tribals' rituals and worship may mistake their beliefs for 'animism', a notion vehemently opposed by Lakra, one of the pioneers of tribal theology and inculturated liturgy in Jharkhand, who claims that they are only "preoccupied with pacifying various spirits"²⁰ and not really worshipping them. If we honestly analyze various religions, do we not find animistic beliefs in every religion, either revealed or natural? What about the Christian notion of "finding God in everything"? From a westerner's point of view, tribal belief may appear as 'animism', but a tribal himself does not think so. The meeting point between Christianity and tribal culture in this regard is the belief that God's Spirit or God Himself is at work in the entire creation, that His creatures are dependent on Him, and that they are dependent on one another for everything.

Tribal Polytheism and Christian Monotheism?

In the past the concept of God according to the tribal worldview was thought to be different from the Christian one. *Adivasi* scholars like Dr. Diwakar Minj tried to prove that tribals were polytheists.²¹ But other tribal scholars held that the tribals had a belief in the "one Supreme Being whom they call Dharmes, Singbonga." According to John Lakra:

It is Him they worship and adore, not the spirits. They worship Dharmes/Singbonga alone, they merely appease, propitiate and pacify the spirits. Even the manita bongako (benevolent spirits), like the ancestor spirits, are just venerated, not worshipped. For the tribals Dharmes is the Supreme Being, Creator, Protector, Preserver, Providence, Controller of all creatures: spirits and human being, Punisher of the wicked, and Forgive of sinners. He is eternal, without beginning and end, Omnipotent and Omniscient. He is their God, Lord and Master. When all else fails them, Dharmes is the last resort, to whom they finally turn for help, saying "Akkuga ninim r'aday" (finally Thou art our only refuge).²²

²⁰ John Lakra, "Rewriting Tribal Anthropology," in *Sevanti* 22 (1997) 20.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 24.

The same opinion is expressed by Parapullil²³ and Koonathan.²⁴ The sacrifice of the Oraon exclusively to *Dharmes* (the Oraon name for the Supreme Being) in the *danda-katta* (splitting the branch) ceremony shows the tribe's belief in the One Supreme Being and in all the other beings as subservient to Him. All this is perfectly compatible with the Christian understanding of God as a compassionate Father who is in heaven taking care of His people. Christian theologians like Van Exem finds in the myth of the *Khasra Khusro* (name of the leprous boy with sores all over the body, who is believed to be the incarnation of the *Singbonga*, the Supreme Being of the Munda tribe), a parallelism to God's intervention in history through Christ.²⁵ In the tribal myth of the incarnation, Christ as *Dharmes*'s only begotten son, sacrificing himself for the tribe, does make sense.

Church, Witchcraft and Exorcism

"Renunciation of Satan and sin" is a pre-requisite to the embracing of Christianity. But one of the major difficulties of the tribals is "to renounce completely the powers and pomp of Satan" and still be "under the clutches of evil powers and the domain of superstitions."²⁶ Witchcraft is the opposite of the Kingdom values of 'love', 'peace' and 'happiness' and Tirkey asserts that "Christianity and witchcraft ... cannot go together."²⁷

In villages with a mixed population of Christian and *sarna adivasis*, it is not easy for Christians to remain untouched by witchcraft and exorcisms which are vehemently opposed by the Church. Even if the Church considers witchcraft, exorcism, etc., as superstitious, these are so deeply rooted in tribal society that Christians, too, yield to them. But are there no exorcisms done in

²³ Parapullil, "Tribal Theology," 30.

²⁴ Yarghese Palaty Koonathan, *The Religion of the Oraons* (Shillong: Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures, 1999) 170-205.

²⁵ A. Van Exem, *The religious System of the Munda Tribe* (St. Augustin: Haus Volker und Kulturen, 1982) 51-63.

²⁶ Raphael Kujur, "Tribal Church in Chotanagpur: Identity and Mission," *Sevartham* 3 (1998) 45.

²⁷ Tirkey, "Christianity Meets Tribals in Chotanagpur," 38-9.

the Church – in her healing ministry and through charismatic prayers? Did Jesus himself not indulge in exorcism during his public ministry? Exorcism is extremely popular with the tribals. A deeper reflection is called about faith and superstition. What is faith in Christianity could be superstitious in *sarna* and what is superstition in Christianity may be faith in the *sarna*. A cautious approach is needed before coming to any conclusion. It is possible to have a convergence of tribal and Christian faiths. Recent theological studies are oriented towards this goal.

Tribal-Christian Spirituality

One of the best things that could have happened as a result of the encounter between Christianity and *sarna* religion is the emergence of a new spirituality, a tribal-Christian spirituality that takes the best of both. In the exploratory period, when the Gospel was first preached to the Jharkhand tribals, there were apprehensions. Consequently, when the missionaries tried to play the "big brother", the tribals resisted.

The real consolidation of Christianity starts taking place after the Second Vatican Council when initiatives were taken by the Church to get rooted in the culture where it was planted. Even while the liturgical and theological 'tribalization' or 'indigenization' of the Church goes on, *sarna* religion begins to assert the richness of its culture. There is a drastic decline in conversions. In these moments of conflicts, negotiations between the two faiths carry on. Tribal spirituality is defined as "applied religion."²⁸ The notion of 'human-natural-supernatural complex' is acceptable to Christianity as well as to *sarna*. A 'holistic' attitude to the inter-relationships between God, nature and human beings is upheld by both.

Tribal spirituality as "an integrated life with belief", according to Kullu, is "that axis around which revolves every aspect of human life, i.e., social, political, economic, religious and cultural."²⁹ Thus

²⁸ P. Ponette, "The Spirituality of the Mundas," *Sevartham* 9 (1984) 70.

²⁹ Paulus Kullu, "Tribal Spirituality, An Integrated Life with Belief," *Sevartham*, 21 (1996) 105-6.

there is no dichotomy between belief and practice, as seen very powerfully in their celebrations, festivities, sacrifices, decision-making process, and above all, in their solidarity with one another.

Ponette emphasizes a 'corporate' tribal spirituality in a Munda context. The way to salvation is the tribe and their unity is to overcome evil, which is basically any breach that would break up their tribal status. It is through the observance of the code established by Singbonga that a Munda safeguards the integrity of his tribal identity. "Belief in the tribal God, sacrifices and belief in the survival of ancestral spirits are the three pillars of their spirituality, the three poles around which the whole of their corporate and individual spiritual life continually swerves."³⁰

Lakra propagates the same line of thought in terms of a communion with God and with one another in a community spirit that take into consideration a tribal's attitude to life in general and his/her way of behaviour in particular.³¹ Thus finding God's will and abiding by it is always in the concrete context of their social interactions - a type of spirituality very much promoted by Christianity itself.

Liturgical Expressions, Ritualistic Practices and Rites Of Passage

Liturgical Expressions

One of the ways in which the beliefs of the people find expression is through liturgy or rituals. Just as the tribals have their rites and rituals for every festival, *puja* or sacrifices, so also the Church has liturgies for different occasions. Certain symbolisms, such as water, are the same in both the religions. Both are monotheistic and have the experience of the Supreme Being as the Creator of the universe. In tribal society salvation is envisaged through the tribe and in Christianity through the Church. Both the religions have festivals linked to agriculture. If *sarna* has a *pahan* (religious functionary) to offer sacrifices on behalf of the villagers, Christianity has a priest to do likewise. If in *sarna* there is sacrifice, in Christianity there

³⁰ Ponette, "The Spirituality of the Mundas," 70.

³¹ John Lakra, "Tribal Spirituality," *Sevartnam* 23 (1998) 3-20.

is the Eucharist. Thus the idea of salvation through sacrifice is common to both. Before the *sarna* rituals, the purifications performed are part and parcel of the sacrifice. In the Church sacrifice, too, the theme of reconciliation emerges very powerfully. Returning to the tribe is understood as a return to God. Those who do not comply with the law of the tribe are excommunicated.³²

Christian Themes in Tribal Festivals and Tribal Spirituality in Christian Celebrations

Human helplessness and dependence on God's Providence stand out among the themes in tribal and Christian festivals. The organization of tribal festivals around the agro-economic operations manifests human vulnerability on the one hand and God's care for people on the other: a realization that all their personal effort and labour in the work of cultivation will come to fruition only with the divine intervention with God making the seeds grow and bear fruit and sending rain in due season for their crops to grow.³³ With the acceptance of one's vulnerability and inter-dependence, arises an attitude of gratitude and thanksgiving, which is noticeable practically in all tribal festivals.

The tribal New Year feast day on the full moon day in the lunar month of *phagua* (February-March) ushers in the new year full of hope, burying the past, thanking God for the past year and welcoming the new with tender and beautiful leaves and flowers.³⁴ The first-January theme of the New Year celebration according to the Christian calendar is in tune with the same theme of thanksgiving. But among tribals before the New Year day vegetables and fruits of the year may not be eaten and the fields may neither be ploughed nor manured as a sign of their reverence to the divine. The sacrifices offered at *sarhuf*³⁵ to the *chala pachcho* (female

³² Tarunoday Regional Theologate, "Reflections on 'Sarna Religion,'" 7-8.

³³ Lakra, "Tribal Spirituality," 14.

³⁴ Tirkey, "Christianity Meets Tribals in Cholanagpur," 39.

³⁵ It is celebrated in the full lunar month *Chait* (end of March and the beginning of April). Since it is an earth-fertility feast, sacrifices are offered and prayers made for a good monsoon and for prosperity.

deity of the sacred grove) show tribals' trust in the divine for good monsoon and bumper crops during the year. While propitiating other spirits there is also an attitude of gratefulness for abundant fruits during the year.³⁶

The feast of *karam*, although primarily ensuring protection of standing crops and healthy children to future mother, is a reminder of God as the ultimate source of all fortunes in their life.³⁷ *Karam* is also related to the new harvest. Only after *karam*, do they eat the first fruits. *Nawakhani*, the feast of the first fruits is another clear example of thanksgiving to God and ancestors: to them is offered first a part of the new harvest, just like in the Old Testament. The *sarna* tribals celebrate *nawakhani* in their own traditional way. Tribal Christians, too, celebrate it with great joy and gaiety. Gratitude to the cattle for their help in agriculture is shown in the feast of *sohrai* in *karik* (October-November). Tribal prosperity is gauged by crops, cattle and children. Without cattle, the tribals who are basically agriculturists cannot be prosperous.³⁸

If we analyze the major Christian festivals like Easter and Christmas we discover the tribal characteristics of 'communion with God and with one another', 'reconciliation and restoration of relationships', life as a 'celebration, joy and hope', God's intervention in human's life and human response to the divine in sacrifice, prayer, service and solidarity. These converging themes need to be studied further. In spite of the similar themes of Christian feasts, they have not yet been understood in a tribal perspective. In other words, the Church has adapted tribal festivals in her liturgies but Christian feasts have not been internally tribalised theologically. Some Christian observances at times appear to be very incompatible to tribal culture. The time of lent and advent, for example, is the time of joy, negotiations and marriage for the tribals. The Church's observances of fast, abstinence and penance during the lent and advent seasons make it impossible for tribals to participate in the life and celebrations of the *sarna* brethren. The Christian liturgical

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

cycle is not in tune with the tribal agricultural cycle. There is a talk of "an intimate transformation of authentic tribal cultural values through their integration in Christianity, and the insertion of Christian values in tribal cultures"³⁹ that is known as 'inculturation' and 'adaptation'. If this is done in the real sense of these terms then only can it be claimed that the tribal Church of Jharkhand has reached a stage of maturity. The striking principles that underlie the festivals of the tribes in Jharkhand are holism, collaboration, dignity of hard work, union with the natural and the supernatural, reverence and respect for life.

Crucial Stages of Life

There are different stages of life and at the beginning of each one of them there are socially recognized functions to mark the occasion. The *adivasis' chhatthi*, like the Christian baptism, is an initiation rite, to incorporate the child into the tribe. The sacrament of marriage for the tribal is a sign of maturity, as it is in the Church. The last rites at death unite a person with ancestors and God. Every person, Christian or *saran*, goes through these three main stages of life.

Incorporation of the Child into a Religio-Cultural Group

Christians through the sacrament of baptism and tribals through *chhatthi* rites give recognition to the child as their own. The candidate is officially made part of the tribe or of the Church. In *chhatthi* tribals invoke the benevolent spirits and other ancestors to take care of the child. Tribal Christians, too, invoke God to bless the child and make its life prosperous. At the same time the Church also insists that the "baptismal promises" be made by the parents and the godparents of the child to renounce Satan and all his activities. What is meant here is a total renunciation of evil and a pledge to walk in the path of the Lord. While the traditional tribal Christian couples select Christian names for their newly born children at the time of baptism, the educated ones choose Hindi names. Traditional *sarna* tribals name children after their grandparents.

³⁹ Kujur, "Tribal Church in Chotanagpur," 49.

After *chhatthi*, the child belongs to its community, clan and tribe as much as it belongs to the Church if it is baptized. The initiation rite leads the child into growth as a full tribal. Giving the child the name of one of the ancestors shows their belief in life after death and their desire to be in the ancestral community after death. They believe that it is in the tribe that the child lives forever. The child is the responsibility of God and the elders.⁴⁰ In baptism, the child is initiated into the Church to be saved through the Church. The ideas are the same, but the expressions of faith are different.

Coming of Age

Christian marriage takes place in a church, whereas tribal marriage does in a village. There are lengthy preparations for the wedding among the *sarria* and many symbols of beginning a new home (yoke, thatching grass, water, etc.) are extensively used. Christians, after the marriage blessing in the church, come back to the village and have the social function of *chumanawan* (village reception). Where Christian faith and tribal culture meet, there arise problems connected with marriage.

Bara makes an exhaustive study of the matrimonial impediments based on different types of relationships.⁴¹ Whereas the impediments of consanguinity do not pose problems, the impediments of tribe endogamy and clan exogamy often create problems, both for the tribal society and for the tribal Church. There is a lot of resistance in certain areas where impediments of tribe endogamy and clan exogamy are overlooked by Church authorities. In this context the question of the 'tribalness' of the Church located in a tribal area can be seriously debated. Is the Church really 'tribal' just because she is located in a tribal area with tribal ministers or is there tribalness in the belief and practices of the church as well?

Two tribal institutions, namely *dhumkuria* (boys' dormitory) and *pel-erpa* (girls' dormitory) were meant to initiate the members of the tribe into manhood and womanhood respectively. With the

⁴⁰ See Tirkey, "Christianity Meets Tribals in Chotanagpur," 33.

⁴¹ David Bara, "Customary Matrimonial Law of the Oraons," *Sevatham* 13 (1988) 3-16.

coming of the Church these have either disappeared or have taken the shape of a catechesis in the Christian faith. Bara lists some other areas of conflict⁴² between the Church and the tribal society: the tolerance of the premarital sex-relations, non-requirement of virginity for marriage, premarital promiscuity, etc., among tribals. Monogamy in the Church may not go well with some tribals. The indissolubility of the existing marriage bond may create further problems for the Church.

However, in many areas there is common understanding between the Church and tribal society. Without the clearance of the *panches* no baptism or marriage can take place. The Church's orientation is towards indissolubility, permanence and sanctity of marriage. Tribal society (even among the non-Christians) has now begun to appreciate the sacramentality and indissolubility of marriage which is good for the family in the long run. Education plays a significant role in bringing about this awareness.

The Final Farewell

The *ekh mankhina* (bringing back the shade) and *konha benja* (great marriage) rites among the Oraon tribe and the funeral rites of the Christians point to the belief in life after death, the communion of saints-cum-ancestors, and the ultimate liberation or salvation. The difference, however, is that tribal culture believes that all the dead, provided they have died a natural death, become benevolent spirits or, in Christian terms, 'saints', whereas the saints in Christianity are only those who have lived an exemplary Christian life, in whose names miracles take place after their death, and are officially declared as saints by the Church. Communion with the ancestors, for some tribes, implies plenty of land to plough in and a lot of cattle to graze on in the afterlife. For the tribals, the union with ancestors is an indicator of salvation. It is in and through the tribe that one is assured of salvation. For Christianity, however, salvation is only in and through the Church, at least as this was hammered home by the early missionaries.