

A Brief Report

On the incidents that followed the installation of the statue of Mother Mary with Red Bordered Saree claimed to be the traditional attire of the Oraon tribe

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1. A case study of the controversy of Mary's tribal attire

In view of understanding the root of the problem of the controversy in the aftermath of the installation of the statue of Mother Mary with red bordered saree, a three-member fact-finding team visited the disputed site in Singpur and made the following observations:

26 May: The statue of Mother Mary with a red bordered saree was installed by Telesphore Cardinal P Toppo on 26 May 2013 in the premises of the Roman Catholic Church Chaminade, Singpur, Kumbatoli, about 20 kilometres from Ranchi. There was perfect peace and tranquility on the Church compound and in the nearby villages during and after the installation of the statue. There were no reports of any opposition or objection to Mother Mary's traditional attire. The Christian community was in a celebrative mood and the local Sarnas had absolutely no objection.

27 May: *Prabhat Khabar*, the Hindi daily in Ranchi, allegedly first reported about the tribal looks of Mother Mary.

28 May: In protest against the red bordered saree of Mother Mary the members of Raji Parha, Sarna Prarthna Sabha and Adivasi Sarna Samiti burned the effigy of Cardinal Telesphore P Toppo near the Dhurwa bus stand.

9 June: For the first time a group of 50-60 Sarna people came to the parish forcefully calling those on the campus for a meeting. According to the report the local people of Singpur were not ready for any protest against the church, but there was pressure from 'outside'. Even the Gram Pradhan was reportedly pressurized by the outside forces to take a stance against the Church.

12 July: An application to the Deputy Commissioner, Senior Superintendent of Police, Ranchi, was submitted by the Archbishop's House, Ranchi, for protection to the statue of Mother Mary, property and priests and religious at Catholic Church, Singpur. The letter stated that the Church in Singpur came to know through '*Prabhat Khabar*' of 9 July 2013, that the Sarna tribals had decided to gather in big numbers to protests against the red bordered saree of the statue of Mother Mary at Catholic Church, Singpur, on 25 August 2013. The letter expressed its apprehension that any undesirable thing might take place if such a huge crowd gathered for the protest.

14 August: The three representatives of the Church submitted an application to the Police station in-charge of Nagri for protection of Roman Catholic Church, Singpur, Kumbatoli. The copy of the letter was given to the Chief Minister of Jharkhand; Collector, Ranchi; Superintendent of Police, Ranchi; Sub-Divisional Officer, Ranchi; Gramin Police Superintendent, Ranchi; Dhurwa Police Station in-charge, Ranchi; Karra Police Station In-charge, Khunti; and Deputy Superintendent of Police, Hatia, Ranchi.

15 August: According to the available reports the meeting of the representative of various Sarna factions took place on 15 August and there was a follow up later on to work out the strategy for the 'Sarna Raksha Yatra'. Apart from the mobilization of the Sarnas to make 25 August 'Yatra' a success, some of the leaders seemed to have told the Sarna people, "There is no problem if you become Muslims, but do not become Christians."

16 August: The Sub-Divisional Magistrate (SDM) sent notice to both the parties—five from the Church and 8 from the Sarna community, for a meeting at the office of SDM to have a dialogue and diffuse tension between both the communities.

21 August: The meeting at the SDM's office between both the parties took place. The SDM asked for an undertaking from the Sarna representatives that they would hold the rally peacefully and that if there was any act of violence or destruction of property, they would be arrested. Probably it was due to the 'no nonsense' attitude of the administration that nothing serious happened. Earlier the court had rejected a PIL seeking banning of the rally and demonstration which it claimed would disturb the peace and harmony. The court said that everybody had the right to express himself or herself as a citizen of the country.

25 August: The day of reckoning! Singpur was tense. Section 144 had been imposed from 4 am to 10 pm near the Church and the school to thwart any untoward incident. There was a heavy deployment of the police forces. It was reported that about 6,000-7,000 people, most of whom were women clad in red bordered saree, were stopped half kilometer before the Church compound by the police forces. According to the reports, there were many non-tribals in the crowd. Some of the youngsters had reportedly carried weapons and wanted to attack the Church. The leaders, however, did not allow them to do so, as they had given an undertaking to the SDM. According to the reliable sources some people had unsuccessfully tried to enter the compound by jumping over the boundary behind the church.

The above are the chronological highlights of the incidents that followed the installation of Mother Mary with red bordered saree. It is not out of place to learn about the religious Congregation that takes care of Singpur parish at present.

2. The Society of Mary

The Society of Mary is a congregation of brothers and priests called the Marianists or Marianist Brothers and Priests. The Society was founded on 2 October 1817 by Blessed William Joseph Chaminade. He was a priest who survived the anti-clerical persecution during the French Revolution. The Marianist Brothers and Priests look to Mary as a model of faith and spirituality. They believe that the best ways to live a spiritual life are

to share their faith with others, work with the poor, and educate and nourish the mind, the body, and the soul. They devote the major part of their time and efforts to inculturation to be rooted in the contexts of new countries and cultures.

Jean Baptiste, the brother of Chaminade, had been a Jesuit novice and scholastic until the suppression of the Jesuits in France in 1762, at which time he returned home, was ordained a diocesan priest, and became part of a group of diocesan missionaries which ran a minor seminary in the town of Mussidan. His two brothers, Louis and William Joseph, who joined him there as students, were both ordained by 1785, and then continued to work with him in running the school. Jean Baptiste was the Director, William Joseph the business manager, and Louis one of the teachers.

The Marianist Order has special devotion to Mother Mary. The Order is dedicated to Mother Mary and tries to promote the Marian values of motherhood, simplicity, promotion of God's will of peace, harmony, justice, simplicity and openness to collaborate with God to make this world a better place to live in. By virtue of their charism to promote the values of Mother Mary, the Marianists got her statue made and installed on the Church campus of the Singpur parish on 26 May 2013 by Telesphore Cardinal P Toppo. Although the Marianist Order and many other such Orders within the framework of the Catholic Church have been using these images for many years, this is the first time such a controversy has arisen.

The land where the school stands today has apparently been donated by the villagers predominantly inhabited by the Sarnas. They wanted a school for their children and invited the missionaries. However, the school is still not recognized by the Government and hence the Scheduled Tribe students among whom there are the Sarnas and Christians, are not able to avail the constitutional provisions. However, due to the availability of funds for the minority students the Christian and Muslim minority students are able to avail the stipends. This has been a bone of contention for some Sarna leaders who at the behest of the right wing activists argue that all their resources are being taken away by the minorities. It should be noted that there are about 1200 to 1300 students in the school and 75 per cent of them are Sarnas, while only 25 per cent belong to the minority and other groups.

3. Observations

First, irrespective of the claim by a faction of the Sarnas that the "red bordered saree" is their traditional attire, the historicity of such a claim has so far not been established. Some of the observers claim that the red bordered saree was first used by the Ursuline Convent School, Ranchi, as its uniform as far back as early 1900s. It should be noted that the Ursuline Sisters first came to Ranchi in 1903 and a year later started the Lace School. Thereafter they also started a school in Ranchi before expanding their educational activities to Tongo, Gumla, Samtoli, Rengarih and other places. A lady who passed out from the Ursuline School Ranchi in 1948 claims that even before she came to the school in 1944, the red bordered saree was in vogue as the school uniform. Two other ladies, one 85 years of age and another 92, endorsed the same idea. It is also brought to our notice that the GEL (Gossener Evangelical Lutheran) Mission that came to Chotanagpur in 1845, started its school already in the middle of the 19th century. It is a matter of investigation as to what school uniform the GEL-supported school had at

that point in time. Even if we are to accept for a moment that the Christian schools and other educational institutions had borrowed the tribal symbols, why is it that there was no problem till date? Further, the question of the Church institutions borrowing from tribal culture does not arise because the Church in Chotanagpur is of the tribals, for the tribals and by the tribals. Hence, the claim of a group of the Sarnas about their monopoly over the red bordered saree is totally misplaced. There is no patent of the red bordered saree. There was a similar case many years ago when St. Mary's School, Doranda, was started by a non-Christian. According to the reports, a former principal of St. Xavier's Doranda allegedly filed a writ in the court to stop the use of the Christian name by a non-Christian. The court verdict, however, allegedly went against the principal of St. Xavier's. The court verdict stated that there was no problem if anybody wanted to use the Christian or other names. The point here is that there are many processes of social change at work and there is constant 'give and take' from one another. Various religions and cultures have borrowed from and added to the richness of one another. It is a sociological phenomenon and it is absurd to monopolize a symbol that is in public domain. It is like saying that the **RED CROSS (+)** is the monopoly of the Christians and if anyone else (non-Christian doctors, hospitals and others, national flag of Switzerland) use this symbol, they will face dire consequences.

Second, there seems to be the role of external forces, primarily belonging to the Sangh Parivar, in the instigation of the Sarna people, who are basically peace-loving. Two of the local villagers of Singpur told us, "We want peace and harmony. We have been living in peace for the last so many years and we would like to continue in that state". The external forces, however, have allegedly bought up some local influential persons. Another villager said, "The transportation of the Sarna people to Singpur from other places for the 25th August protest rally was arranged by the fundamentalist forces". It was also reported that the fundamentalist forces had been holding regular meetings to incite and mobilize the locals to oppose the Church-related activities and not only the 'red bordered saree' that had created the recent controversy. There is thus a complete saffronisation of some sections of the Sarna community.

Third, the faction of the Sarnas seems to be aware of the fact that there is no legal standing for their argument if the case goes to the court. However, it was quite embarrassing and humiliating for them to withdraw their protest because they had reached a point of no return. One of the villagers reported that the leaders of the protest knowing it well that they were not going to gain anything from the controversy were not willing to withdraw their rally on 25th August because of "threat" to their life. It implies that the fundamentalist forces are using coercion, allurements and threat to mobilize people against the Church.

Fourth, the protesters were aware of the fact that such statues with red bordered saree and similar paintings had been in public domain for quite some time in various places. However, there had been no protest against any of them before the Singpur controversy. If at this point in time there is a protest, the action makes one suspicious about the intent of the protest. The elections are round the corner and it is expected to polarize the votes in favour of some debutant Sarna leaders.

Fifth, there are evidences of internal politics in the Sarna camp for monopoly over the 'Oraon' Sarna communities. There is no homogeneity. The Sarnas are also divided on

ideological lines. Some are heavily influenced by the Hindutva ideology, others by Christian and still others are neutral. There are many in the Sarna communities who are sensible and want peace and harmony. The Sarna religion as such is peace loving, harmonious and accommodative. However, if it is influenced by the external fundamentalist ideology, there is the emergence of suspicion, hatred, violence, intolerance and disharmony. These are the values quite alien to the Sarna religion. While majority of the Sarna communities seem to be tolerant, accommodative and peace loving, there are some that have lost most of their Sarna values. They have been co-opted by the very values the Sarna religion is opposed to.

Sixth, what happened on 25th August, viz. 'Sarna Dharam Raksha Yatra' was part of the larger conspiracy. It was on the same day that Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) had called for the 'Yatra' in Ayodhya. Further, the Church has been threatened with dire consequences if the statue is not removed by 25th December 2013. When the Kandhmal violence against Christians broke out in 2008, a massive bundh call was given for 25th December. We, thus see a common pattern of modus operandi which looks like the trademark of the Sangh Parivar.

Seventh, delegitimation of tribal identity of the Church in Chotanagpur seems to be the main agenda of the Sarna groups incited by the Sangh Parivar. The hate speeches cautioned that the Christians should not celebrate the tribal festivals. This has far-reaching implications. Tomorrow Christians will not be allowed to use the drums or dance tribal dances or for that matter speak the tribal languages. This is a strategy to deliberately alienate the Christian tribals from the tribal roots so that an explanation can be given that since they do not practice tribal culture any more, their Scheduled Tribe status can be withdrawn.

4. Identity Politics over Mother Mary's Attire

Some sections of the Oraon Sarna community claim that the red border saree is their 'traditional attire' and that dressing Mother Mary, a lady with a foreign origin with it, hurts their religious sentiments. Their argument is that the tribal looks of Mother Mary will encourage conversions from the Sarna religion. They also claim that 100 years from now tribals will think of Mother Mary as a tribal because of her dress and this will facilitate many more conversions.

The critics of the above line of thought rubbish the apprehensions and argue that the 'modern' Oraons clad in the Western costumes (pants & shirts) even 66 years after the departure of the colonizers, do not look like British. The Church authorities argue that the tribal Christians are as much tribals as the Sarna tribals and that they have equal right over the red border saree. The Church also claims it is a simple issue made complicated by the "vested interests" that are apparently indulging in triggering the religious passion of certain sections of the community to suit their political purpose and to divert the attention of public at large from the main issues of development, land alienation, deforestation, rampant mining and industrialization, corruption and plundering of the local resources.

In fact, the protests, demonstrations, claims and counter claims, dialogue and its failure, present a very good site for identity perception and articulation. It also manifests the way people and groups perceive themselves and others. The perception of identity is very much

conditioned by the situations—social, economic, political and cultural. These perceptions and articulations are prone to be manipulated by insiders and outsiders equally, depending upon the context. However, there are some questions which need to be answered to analyze the present crisis in Jharkhand: Who constitutes the Oraon community? Are non-Sarna Oraons, viz. Oraon Christians, not Oraons just because they are Christians? If the Oraon Christians continue to be Oraons despite their religious diversification, what is the problem if they own up the Oraon culture in its internal make up and external manifestations? If there is such homogeneity in the Oraon society, why is it that the migrant Oraons in Assam and the Andaman Islands are not considered as ‘Scheduled Tribes’ by the State? What is the religion of the Oraons practicing traditional religion—the Sarna or the Oraon because there are as many tribal religions as there are tribes and the Oraon is one of those tribes. The Oraon is an ethnic category practicing the Oraon religion. Is the red bordered saree an essential element of the Oraon culture without which the Oraon culture and identity cannot survive? In that case, what is the historicity of the red border saree in the Oraon community? In Bolivia, not many years ago, one of the ‘tribes’ claimed that its flag was ‘traditional’ for centuries. The critics, however, said that flag was ‘invented’ only a few years ago primarily to use it as a symbol for political mobilization and identity assertion. What is identity? Is it static, stagnant, permanent and immutable?

I think to perceive and articulate culture and identity as fixed, permanent and immutable is a result of false consciousness. The red bordered saree has surely become a part of the Oraon culture but to reduce the entire Oraon identity to one small external element of culture is a denial of temporality and agency to the subject, both Sarna and Christian. This essentialist approach which understands culture and identity in terms of primordiality is problematic as it negates fluidity, porousness and mutability of culture and identity. The Oraon communities of Jharkhand, whether Sarna or Christian, share the same history of migration, sojourn and settlement in the Chotanagpur region. They share the same geography, worldview, philosophy and cultural ethos. They have the same kinship structure, festivals, signs and symbols, rites and rituals barring a few.

When some Oraons decided to convert to Christianity in Chotanagpur about 160 years ago, a new community of Oraon Christians emerged. The community practiced Christianity in and through the Oraon culture even while including some new elements from the Christian faith. There were continuous dialogue and negotiation between the old and the new. The process of inculturation which basically experiences and manifests Christian faith in the Oraon culture is responsible for the present crisis. However, this process is nothing new. This has been happening in the case of the Hinduisation of the tribes across the country. The same process was and is still at work across the world—in North America, South America, Africa, Australia and in Asia.

Various studies reveal that many Oraons practicing their traditional faith converted to Christianity for three reasons—social, economic and spiritual. Some of the converts embraced Christianity because they were ostracized from the Oraon community either for some mishaps in the village for their alleged practice of witchcraft. Excommunication in an Oraon context is a virtual death thereby cutting the ostracized family off completely from the rest of the community. This social situation compelled many to find an alternate identity in Christianity. In some cases economic reason was primarily responsible for change in religious affiliation of the Oraons. Various churches engaged in philanthropic activities—education, health care and development being the primary ones. The converts or Christians got priority in the Christian institutions. The spiritual reason is often cited as the main cause

of the shift in the religious affiliation of the Sarna Oraons. However, no one reason can be given prominence for a change in the religious beliefs. Oftentimes it is a combination of multiple factors resulting in the change of religions. In some case studies it has also been noticed that the three causes above do not come into the picture at all and the change of religion is only due to marriage alliances.

In spite of a rupture in the relationship between the Sarna and the Christian, they had been fighting for the common cause of the Jharkhand separate state. They have also been fighting for their rights together for their empowerment and development.

The present divide therefore rather than helping the larger tribal society in general and the Oraon community in particular, is doing the greatest damage to them. Firstly, it is diverting the attention of the Oraons and other marginalized communities from the main issues. Tribal communities do not gain anything from this controversy. The only beneficiaries of this controversy are the communal forces in nexus with the land, timber and other mafias. Secondly, this event is an example of brazen and desperate communalization of Mother Mary's tribal looks for polarization the communities before the forthcoming elections.

This escalation of tension which at first instance may look like religious has nothing to do with religion. It is simply a political stunt of the vested interests who want to divide and rule the tribal community on the basis of religion. There is politics of identity. The statue of Mother Mary has become a site of identity politics thereby negating tribal identity to the Church in Jharkhand. There is a manipulation and monopolization of Indigeneity. The fear that 100 years from now people will consider Mother Mary in the tribal costume as a tribal and this will trigger conversions, is only hypothetical. The red bordered saree is a small part of the larger Oraon identity. There is a mixing up of the total identity with a small part of the identity which is highly problematic. It should be noted that the Oraons do not have a written tradition as in Hinduism, Islam and Christianity which are established religions. The Oraons still have the oral tradition and if the red bordered saree is their tradition, it is the same for the Sarna and Christian communities as they have the same history and ancestry. They share the same culture and worldview. Except for the religious diversification all the other cultural elements are the same. Hence, to reduce the identity in its entirety to merely religious identity is a gross flaw even in identity politics. The Oraon religion is known to be tolerant, harmonious, accommodative, peace-loving and if one sights elements of hatred, communalism, disharmony and divisiveness in it, there is an alarming sign that external divisive forces have infiltrated the Oraon community, which can result only in destruction. It is however not too late to be conscious of the external threats and start reasserting their common origin and history all over again for a better and brighter future. For such a thing to happen there is no other option but to jointly fight for their development, empowerment and rights.
