

Thomas Manickam
Nirmal Sadan, Bastar

CULTURAL INTERACTIONS AND THE SOCIO-RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION AMONG THE TRIBALS OF BASTAR

Introduction

Bastar, the largest tribal district of Madhyapradesh, probably of the whole of India, accommodates about two million tribal people. The prominent among them are the Madias, the Ghonds, the Bhils, the Oraons and their clannish groups. By and large each tribal community occupies its own aboriginal geographical boundaries with their respective tribal traditions and customs, dialects, administrative systems, social celebrations, religious beliefs, myths, folklores, ballad songs, moral and ritual practices, including superstitions. Ancestral and cultural identity is being scrupulously maintained in all possible ways and it is one of the primary concerns of each tribe. Wilful violations by any inmate of a clan of a tribe of its ancestral beliefs and practices would end up in ostracisation together with physical tortures and social censures and sanctions. Yet the urge on the part of the younger generations to accommodate to the demands of contemporary cultural interactions of other peoples is conspicuous and the tension and the strain is significant. In this context it is proper to make some critical observations on the phenomenon of the socio-religious transformation, taking place among the tribals of Bastar.

1. The Forces of Interaction

Among the forces or agents of interaction with the tribals, the following may be rightly mentioned; New immigrants from other states and communities, migrating tribals, business men, government project-holders and skilled labourers, educational agencies, social activists, missionaries of major religions, humanitarian service corps, political parties, communal revivalists, militant activists and trade unions. In a complex living setting it is not one factor that contributes to change

and transformation but an aggregate of elements of various agencies that work together to bring out changes in the life-style of a people. This is also applicable to the tribals of Bastar as well.

i) *The New Immigrants*

After the independence of India and after the unification of the petty kingdoms into one republic in 1950 there were perceptible number of immigrants from other states moving into Bastar which was governed by two major tribal royal dynasties. Most of these immigrants belonged to caste-Hindus, Muslims and other minor religiously structured communities. They purchased lands either from government agencies or directly from the aboriginals and settled in the vicinity of the *adivasis* or in the small townships which were in ancient times were just clusted villages. These immigrants had obtained permanent job oportunities in the administration of the district and gradually started wielding their traditional organizational control over the aboriginal tribals. As forest rangers, officers, police and as other civil administrators, the new immigrants obtained considerable control over the loosly organized tribals, so much so that the inter-action between the tribals and the new immigrants was more towards creating an inferiority complex in the minds of the tribals; and the consequent fear of subjugation kept the tribals socially alienated from rather than integrated with the ruling class. In fact the immigrants from other states practically became the dominating group even in a village. Mass illiteracy on the part of the tribals added fuel to the fire of segregation. At the same time one may rightly observe that the life style of the neighbouring upper classes spontaneously challenged the aboriginals that their younger generations were stimulated to imitate rather blindly the attractive externalities of their neighbours. This tendency gave rise to the blind adaptation of the socially attractive elements of the upper class in dress style, festivities etc. One may point out in this respect the style of wearing *sāri* by women of the immigrant groups has been fast imitated by the aboriginals as well. So is the case of wearing blouse seperately, apart from the tribal style of covering the whole body with one piece of a long cloth. Regarding imitating the social festivities of the immigrants the aboriginals have already adopted the externalities of Holi, Dēepavali, Dasara etc. Thus a submissive sense of social imitation by way of close contact in the past fourty-five years of interaction by the tribal aboriginals since the independence of India with the more civilized

groups of people from other parts of the country has changed some of the marks of identity of the tribals of Bastar. These transformations have certain religious implications also as the tribals are more and more attracted by the religious externalities of the upperclass as they are more taken up by the pomp and gaiety of such festivities as Holi and Deepavali, Dasara and Ramleela.

ii) *The Business Men*

The next group of people who interacted with the tribals of Bastar are the business men hailing from Maharashtra, Gujrat, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Orissa and Andhrapradesh. These people following their immigrants' relations found the natural and forest resources especially, teak and sal wood, tamarind, salseeds, tandu leaves, and many other auxiliary forest goods very mercantile in neighbouring cities of the states that encircle Bastar district. They made use of the tribals to use foul means to transport these goods out of Bastar without being noticed by the forest guards or other responsible officers. The tribals became prey to the harrasment of those governement officials as and when they are caught in such malpractices of stealing and transporting forest good across the borders of Bastar district. Moreover these business men also became middle men or brockers who used to extort even the agricultural goods, the tribals carry from their own field to the market without giving real market value of such products of their hard labour. This is even now continued unchecked by any legal system. To add misery to the miserables the middle men act as crooked contractors of public work departments and these pay wages much less than what has been stipulated at least officialy by the government. The tribals have no bargaining power with the contractors as these constitute almost like brute force without any unified leadership and bargaining power and without any clear ideas of justice and just wages. Similar operation also exist with the tender holders of tandu leaves. Very meagre daily wages are settled with the leaf-pickers, and the tender holders amass large profits out of the sale of large quantity of tandu leaves in the open markets outside Bastar.

The general terms of business transactions are so exploitative that they favour only the contractors, and the brockers. Often grave sighs of exploitation surface among the tribals, but the lack of co-ordinated activities of resistance on the part of the tribals, keeps them always under suppression and oppression. In fact they cannot raise their

voice against any of these unjust transactions of the business men that gradually these people develop a sort of crooked reaction to the prevailing forces, to the extent of losing their primitive innocence, sincerity and openness. All such fine human qualities are steadily vanishing from their interactions with not only businessmen but also with other neighbours as well. This transformation of character is really unfortunate and it may have long standing impact on our general social fabric.

iii) *Big Projects and Skilled Labourers*

A third factor that contributes to the change of attitude among the tribals is the proposed gigantic irrigation project known as the Bodhaghat plan. Although this magnificent plan was conceived and partially executed at the foundational level by the government, it is now reported to be cancelled. The cancellation is said to be due to adverse reaction from the local tribal population whose settlements would be submerged under water. Moreover the project's larger share of benefits would go to the skilled labourers, most of whom would be aliens. Since the local tribals are not trained in any skilled labour, what they could benefit from the point of view of providing permanent job opportunities for the local people, is insignificant. At the initial level of construction some man-power utilization in the form of brute manual labour may be offered to the largely unskilled workers of the locality. Thus the threat to their properties and settlements, as well as lack of adequate benefits for the local population have generated among the local tribals a sense of insecurity, and their reactions to the execution of the plan is rather negative. At the same time assurances of adequate compensation for the possible loss of landed properties, facilities for resettlement when the people of the catchment area are displaced, are not offered by the government upto the satisfaction of the local population. Consequently a negative and reactionary attitude to anything that is of big plan offered by the government is being generated in the minds of the tribals. Government departmental officers often adopt only defensive steps in favour of safeguarding their own policies and positions. As a result of all these, proper human interaction does not take place and apparently there is no psychological and social rapproachment between the tribals and the government agencies. The latter often turn to be hostile to the local tribals. All these contribute towards creating and maintaining a constant fear complex and distrust in any developmental projects offered by the government. This has

generated an attitude of pessimism among the tribals. Besides, there is no tangible evidence of imparting any social conscientization to the tribals in view of making them better disposed towards positive ways of responding and co-operating with the developmental plans of the government. No healthy transformation of people for better living can be achieved without having the co-operation of the people themselves.

It is also observed that big projects threatens the ecological harmony of nature and people, serve the skilled man power more than the unskilled mass of local people. The local people are made victims of the capricious motivations of the contractors and executives.

iv) Educational Institutions and their Transformative Function

Social changes based on right value consciousness depend very much on the educational institutions of a people. In this regard the district of Bastar, being an *ādivasi* area lags much behind the rest of Madhyapradesh. Whereas the general literacy percentage of Madhya-pradesh is around 18, that of Bastar district is around 8 of which the larger representatives are of the immigrant communities from other states as mentioned above. Bastar, which was divided into two or three petty kingdoms before the independence of India, is now geographically one and a half times bigger than the state of Kerala where the literacy is almost 100%, one may imagine the terrific contrast between the different areas of the country where education makes drastic social changes or due to the lack of it no social change at all.

In the district at present there are two arts and science colleges situated at Jagdalpur and Kanker, the two main townships of Bastar; they are affiliated to the Ravisankar University of Raipur, three hundred kilometers away from Jagdalpur, the district headquarters of Bastar, Also there are two Industrial Training Institutes (ITI) and an engineering college is in its making. A few high schools, most of them are in the townships, and a few more primary schools, some of them are in the villages. The situation of the village primary schools is so pathetic that there is hardly any regular attendence of students or of teachers. In many schools of the interior villages the teaching facilities are almost nil. Schools run by the minority communities and of some voluntary organizations and trusts do fairly good job in the matter of promoting correct religious and moral values in the minds of the students, especially of the tribal communities.

One of the useful means of juvenile character formation is conducting boarding houses or hostels specially suited to the temperaments of the *ādivasis*. Those run by Christian missions and the Ramakrishna mission are worth mentioning. Values of equal sociality, equitable sharing of community facilities, sense of fraternity, patriotic spirit, team spirit, sportsmanship, horticultural and agricultural skills etc. are some of the human and socio-cultural values which these hostels administrative staff try to inculcate in the tribal students. Along with these common cultural values irrespective of particular religious affiliations some spiritual values are also imparted to them for personal integration and spiritual outlook, which is foundational to our common Indian culture. Thus in the course of time there can be some change in the general perspectives and attitudes of the next generation of the tribal people. One thing is sure; without satisfactory educational infrastructure no significant transformation would take place among the tribals of Bastar, as in the case of many other tribal groups elsewhere.

v) *Social Activists*

There are number of voluntary organizations with cultural and humanitarian interests among the tribals of Bastar. Bastar tribal welfare association, Bastar Dharma Kshema Mandali, Catholic Diocese of Jagdalpur, Tribal rural health care association, Ramakrishna Mission, Divine light social welfare organization of Sivananda Ashram movement, etc. are some of such social organizations. Practically all of them are working under their own respective spiritual ideals and motivations. Some of these organizations are public registered societies with clearly defined objectives and with government approved rules and by-laws with publicly audited accountability. Most of them receive foreign contribution and even technical advice, assistance and personnel collaboration. So they are not spurious nominal organizations. Most of them run primary schools, nurseries, health care centres, family welfare programmes, health workers, training programmes, dispensaries, hostels, specially caring for girls etc. These are all aimed at bringing about right hygienic sense, social values and values of better human living. However, because of the prevailing low literacy percentage among the mass of the tribals, apparently there is no immediate tangible results of progress in any of the real human developmental values of life. Change of life style superficially, as I have mentioned earlier, is observable; yet it is more due to the spontaneous sense of imitation that is conspicuous among the younger generation.

Transformation as a healthy sociological and anthropological phenomenon of growth based on interior motivational values can come about only by healthy interactions between individuals, small and freely transacting neighbourhood families, as well as by means of common celebrations of festivities that are culturally divergent. In the last case there is the possibility of sharing the meaning and message of the various myths of the diverse communities which historically belong to different tribal factions. But this transaction of the myths of the various tribals could not be so far achieved in any significant way. This may be due to the fact that the voluntary organizations who are engaged in promoting such social interactions themselves are not quite conversant with the languages, dialects, and the symbolic structures of the living expressions of these people. Moreover they themselves feel that they are culturally superior and self-placed over against the *ādivasis*. So proper involvement is not deep enough.

vi) Missionaries of Major Religions

Perhaps this is more significant a point in the context of understanding the religious implications of the cultural interactions of the various peoples and communities living and interacting in the same anthropological environment known as the tribal belt. Often there is the sweeping allegation that the major religions are doing active 'conversion' work among the tribals and they are destroying the tribal identity of the local people. So far Bastar district is concerned there is hardly any truth in this kind of propaganda often aimed at Christian missionaries by caste-Hindus. Their failure to disown caste-discrimination and to integrate the tribals into a fraternity beyond caste barriers is often projected as an accusation against Christian and Islamic religious communities that they are encouraging "religious conversion".

In fact "conversion" itself is a term of the phenomenology of the process of transformation. Transformation is so natural a process that occurs and should continue to occur at every stage of our bio-psycho-evolutionary process of mutation and growth. Transformation is a process of metamorphosis as that of a snake shedding of its rough skin while developing a new tender skin over its body, or like a silk worm undergoing the pupa stage in the cocoon while transforming itself into a beautiful butterfly. Conversion should be an interior transformation of a person based on convictions of motivational values

of life. A spendthrift is converted into a saving depositor only if he is convinced of the value of saving for future security. A saving man is cautious of spending over luxuries for the moment and he would calculate the future consequences of spending lavishly for unnecessary items. He would link up all his other relational matters such as the educational expenses of his children, possible scarcity situations in the future, loosing one's job by some accidental causes, helplessness on physical disabilities etc. with his earning means and would wisely save for the future eventualities. In short, such a man is a transformed man, a converted man from the careless attitudes to careful value-consciousness. A similar transformative process of consciousness-change has to take place among the caste-Hindus so that they themselves shed off the caste-apartheid of its orthodox fundamentalism, and thereby see in the right perspective the so called "conversion-work" of the missionary religions. It was against such orthodox caste-discriminating fundamentalism of the Brahmanic Hinduism that Sri Buddha fought vigorously and instituted a religion of casteless fraternity called "Buddha sangham" which was propagated in a larger missionary way by emperor Ashoka.

Similarly with a universal vision of human fraternity, as created and preserved and destined with a common goal of reunion with the Creator, Jesus Christ and even Prophet Muhammad preached religions for one human fraternity. The basic truth in these prophetic religions is that there is only One True and Holy God who is the father of all humans, and the humans constitute one fraternity by a bond of divine love with one another by reason of their common origin and destiny. This basic vision of human solidarity makes everybody feel equal and fraternal to each other. Discriminations are later made by human pride and selfishness and so they should be shed out as we grow in our awareness about the fundamental equality of humans and of our common fraternal bond of human and divine love. Until we arrive at this level of consciousness we all need constant enlightenment and conversion to the fundamental truth of humanity. All missionary religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam are attempting in their own respective charismatic ways to highlight this truth of humanity which orthodox caste-Hindus are not aware of. So they may need more of such enlightenment and this would certainly constitute a transformation of attitudes. This is called conversion in the real sense of the term. It is a process of one's understanding truth and transforming oneself unto the known truth. This

is so because the wisdom prevails to say *satyameva jayate*, truth alone shines forth victorious.

In Bastar where so much of oppression and exploitation prevails under various pretexts and so are perpetuated by vested interested religious and other socio-economic brokers of various immigrant groups, religions, which are not that caste-controlled, are doing their systematic transformative work under the existing regulations of Indian Constitution, which guarantees fundamental rights for practising and propagating one's religion. Religious movements like the new Vedantic school of Hinduism known as Ramakrishna Mission as propagated by the Vivekananda Ashrams or by its women's counterpart known as Śārada Mutth are also preaching and propagating humane and socially conditioned universal value systems very much accommodated to the contemporary needs of the people of Bastar. They also engage themselves in more charitable activities such as running hospitals, orphanages, hostels etc. An impartial observer may very well identify in such movements the indirect impact of Christian Missions which have already done considerable transformative work even to challenge the close-minded esoteric religious fundamentalism of Hinduism.

The direct transformative impact of the missionary charities on the tribals is not so tangible. Although a lot of negative and vigorous counteractions are unleashed by militant groups, such as *Rashtriya Svayam Sevak Sangh* (RSS) against the Christian Missions, they all just indicate their own points of defeatism. Hinduism itself is a 'divided house' on issues which are no more tenable on universal terms. Where caste discrimination is still the major dividing factor and on the basis of which the defenders of orthodoxy in Hinduism segregate people and downgrade the tribals, it is so obvious that orthodox Hinduism is a broken cistern and it can carry no more water. The best challenge offered so far against the discriminative character of Hinduism is that of Baba Saheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the father of Indian Constitution. His own conversion to Neo-Buddhism in order to escape from the octopus grip of the caste-strings of orthodox Hinduism and in that enthusiasm and power the freedom he brought to numerous Harijans of the Mahar community in Maharashtra just a few years before the Independence of India is the best example of the cause for which Christianity and other missionary religions stand. The missionary religions preach the universal brotherhood of mankind, stand for the cause of a just society and

propagate against all oddities of the most fundamental truth of human brotherhood. They also work towards achieving this goal of human solidarity as well as freedom for all humans to live the ideals of equality and fraternity. Until all humans are prepared to accept these basic truths of humanity, Christian missions would continue to work for liberation and transformation of peoples, especially the oppressed classes conscientizing them about their God-given human rights and dignity. They also welcome all likeminded people from any religious persuasion to join hands with them and work together for a common humanitarian cause which is equally a divine mission according to the perspectives of Christ, whom the Christian missionaries follow with conviction and commitment. They believe that theirs is a small task, an instrumental service to humanity for the integral transformation of humanity at large but the real transformation is worked out by God himself according to His own plans and programmes, times and seasons. Any human activity is only an act of co-operation with that of God.

The communal rivalists like the Aryasamagists fanned by its political backing force the *Bhāratiya Janatā Party* and its militant youth wing the RSS are actually doing disservice to the cause of human solidarity when they are violently negative to all Christian missionary activities which are directly aimed at good educational and cultural transformation of all people of Bastar irrespective of tribals or non-tribals, namely the people who immigrated to Bastar from various communities across the border of this district. The only collaborative or at the best co-operative partner for socio-cultural transformation work in Bastar is the Ramakrishna Mission which itself, as I mentioned before is self-transformed neo-Hindu religious movement which has got in its core the most fundamental Vedantic insight that God is the most fundamental unifying force in nature and without which no human effort is worth or meaningful. All manifold activities of human good will from any corner or from any source can be properly integrated with this one unifying terminal. This basic belief also unifies the various missionary movements of the major religions interested in the socio-cultural transformation of the life of our tribal human brethren.

vii) *The Naxalite Militancy*

The most recent emergent force of transformation in Bastar is the Naxalite movement that has probably infiltrated to Bastar from the

borders of Andhrapradesh. Some of this militant groups are said to have gone into the interior forests of Bastar and started operating from clandestine bases. Recent killings of police troupes by ambushing them on their search operations and frequent violent interventions in the villages are showing signs of violent eruption of certain reactionary forces of change. They have often threatened the life of road contractors, tandu leaf brockers and business middle men who do not give due prices to the agricultural commodities of the ordinary villagers. The initial and incidental cause of the infiltration of the Naxalites to Bastar is said to be the exploitation of the tandu leaf brockers who do not give reasonable wages to the tandu pickers. If this is the true reason behind the Naxalite reaction one can very well understand the unjust wage system that is prevailing in this area. Rectification by all concerned of the unjust and exploiting systems of social interaction between business men and farmers, contractors and workers, *jamindars* (big land owners) and bonded labourers, etc. is the right approach to counteract the violent and inhuman reactions of the Naxalites. It is a matter of truism or at least as part of their ideology and practice that they are primarily concerned with the rectification of the unjust socio-economic system by means of violent action, no matter who is to become their victims, the really exploiting and vested interested rich people or the poor innocent workers and poor villagers. Any way the quite and serene atmosphere of the Bastar *ādivasi* village-order of life is violently disturbed by the Naxalitism recently. It must be also an eye-opener to all men of good will who want smooth and enlightened ways of socio-cultural transformation.

3. Signs of Socio-Cultural Transformation

Collating together the various signs of socio-cultural transformation of the tribals of Bastar in the past twenty years (1972-1992) during which all the above mentioned agencies of interaction operated in Bastar, now culminating in the movement of Naxalitism, we may observe the following signs of socio-cultural transformation : On the external level of attire and decorum the half clad women folk of the urban areas have adapted themselves to the style of dress and decorum of the immigrant women from other regions. In the rural areas this phenomenon is gradually infiltrating as the urban culture is percolating to the suburbs and the nearby rural areas. Among the men folk the

minimum loin cloth clading style is very much in vogue in the villages though the new school going generation is gradually switching over to the urban styles of wearing fashion-dresses. It is all a matter of education that is going to change this aspect of cultures. There is fast sweeping imitation craziness among the youth of the tribals, who frequent the urban areas for various purposes, to buy and wear at any cost what the so called upper class do.

Alcoholism which is so rampant in the rural areas in the native style of making and drinking toddy from the jungle palm trees is gradually giving way to the urban styles of going to the city bars. The youth either buy their choice-items from the bars and enjoy in company with the peers at the bar itself or take them out to their own private shelters in the villages. Drinking, dancing and singing in groups of ballad movement is part of the traditional entertainment. There is not much refinement in these entertainment from what it was in ancient times.

The work of Christian missions in some centres has created some sense of saving among the villagers, and the younger educated generation with a view to instill in them a sense for planing for the future security. This has shown considerable sign of progress so much so that now many villagers and youths have their own saving accounts in the rural or urban banks. One of the basic cultural signs of transformation is this development of consciousness of people towards future security. Living in the present with a sense of planning for the future while learning lessons from the miserable wastage of the ancestors is transformed way of living; and yet it will take still more years to arrive at some tangible level of achievement of such values of life by the Bastar tribals.

The values of safety, security and stability have already started showing their marks of acceptance by the tribals as they are more and more interested in constructing baked brick houses replacing the old mud-walled houses which often collapse during the rainy seasons. Although mud houses are good heat-resistents during the scorching sunny summers they are least safe from the attacks of wild animals, burglars, and even termites. The make-shipt types of thatched roofs seldom protect the inmates from inclement and incessant rains and severe winter. Further they are easy prey to the termites which cause considerable damage to all wooden stuffs. By way of learning from

the new methods of low cost construction of houses introduced by the housing board of the government, there is instilled in the minds of the *ādivāsīs* the need for constructing houses for safety, security and stability.

Also the sense of permanency in settlement, with a purpose for regular cultivation of lands in modern scientific ways of ploughing, manuring, with rotation of crops and periodic pesticidal treatment, finding ways of irrigation, storing for preservation of seeds etc. is gradually developing among the wandering type of tribals. These are signs of hope and signals of progress due to the interaction the tribals are having with the other communities which are more developed in these matters.

4. Socio-Religious Transformation

Let me come to the concluding observation. It is about the central point of this study: the socio-religious transformation. In the context of numerous human problems of underdevelopment, illiteracy, mass exploitation by high handed groups of other communities, discriminative treatment and segregation by caste-Hindus there is very little scope for thinking in terms of spiritual and religious values of a kind different from what the tribals have as inherited from their ancestors. They continue to believe in the mysterious working of the spirit both good and evil according to the rhythm of nature and they also believe that such hidden forces could be disciplined to suit to their tastes and temperaments by means of spells, magic and votary rituals. Hence a lot of superstitions are being practised even in the midst of the dire needs of medical treatment. Many tribals still believe in the efficacy of performing magical rituals to ward off evil spirits and their alleged affectation in diseased persons. Medical treatment is called for only when they are sure that the spirit-cult is of no use. By this time the patient would be almost at the point of death. So what is practised under the label of spirit belief or religious rituals are not promotive of good health and social hygiene. Superstitions have to give way to the grasp of truth in all aspects of its manifestation, and for that matter not only in social sciences and their enlightening insights but also in the sound teachings of the great gurus of wider humanity. Let truth come from any corners of the universe. All truths are meant for the enlightenment of all humans. Why tribals alone should be

prevented from the grasp of the fundamental religious truths which are liberative in nature for the good of humanity? The Christian missions, the Ramakrishna mission and the Divine Light Society of Rishikesh are all in the field with the sole aim of bringing about certain socio-religious transformation which are not fundamentalistic, sectarian and communalistic. At the same time agencies of communalistic and Hindu orthodox revivalists are also at work very vigorously. So the expected socio-religious transformation is very slow in its progress towards achieving the expected goals.