

II. ENCOUNTER BETWEEN HINDUS AND SANTALS: A Case Study on Process and Results

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Topic in Specific Terms

Religion is acting as a medium for solidarity, cohesion and unity among the members of a specific religious group. At the same time two different forms of religion are giving rise to conflict and contradiction. A number of religious leaders are of the opinion that all forms of religion appear to be different from one another, but the ultimate goal points to a focal point which is one, without any conspicuous change or even variation. To test this hypothesis attempt has been made here to understand the process of interactions between two religious ideas and the resultant thereof. The two sets of religion under consideration are Hindu and the tribal. For the former a generalised dimension has been taken care of and for the latter it is specific for the Santals.

Religion, both with ideas and more with forms is never static, rather it is undergoing through continuous change, either in feeble or fast form. The rate of change depends on a number of factors which either enhance or restrict the change. It may also be noted that the same religion appears to be somewhat different in two geographical areas. Like other traits of culture, religion is under the influence of acculturation and thereby some amount of miscegenation is not impossible. As mentioned earlier, religion is dynamic and is undergoing through either imperceptible variation of perceptible change. This is true with religion both of the Hindus and the Santals.

Religion of the Hindus and Santals

In the aerial coverage of the present scheme, a number of foci have been taken into consideration so that representative cross-section may be made for the purpose of proper understanding. The main foci are the city area of Calcutta, the urban area of Jhargram, a subdivisional town, a village named Agoya and a remote village away from Agoya,

named Kodapura, totally dominated by the Santals. Except the first, i.e. Calcutta, all the foci are located in the district of Midnapur, West Bengal.

Except the last village, viz. Kodapura, the Santals are living with Hindu caste and scheduled caste groups. In fact, in the city area of Calcutta, the Santal population is practically negligible. The Santal population increases and as compensation the Hindu population decreases as one moves from urban complex to remote village. In socio-cultural hierarchy, the Hindus are placed on a higher level compared to the Santals. However, among the Hindus, there are sub-groupings, specially among the castes, placed both vertically and horizontally. In generalised way it appears that Hindus and Santals are two different groups with the possession of a number of characters of identity.

On Interactions

Religion is perhaps a phenomenon closely connected with Man. Naturally both the Hindus and the Santals have their own respective religions. Between two such religious ideas, beliefs and practices there is neither contradiction nor conflict. Even then, interactions are not completely absent. The process of interaction and its product do not appear to be conspicuous in the area of higher domination of religious groups. As in the city of Calcutta and in the remote village of Kodapura direct interference between two groups is seldom possible. In the city area the Santals are not only numerically recessive, but at the same time they are scattered. As a result, Santal society in the strictest sense of the term is hardly met with. On the other hand, for their living within wide Hindu folk, the Santals are found to be imbued with many of the culture traits of the Hindus. In such interactions, religion is also affected. Direct influence of Hindu traits on the Santals in the remote village of Kodapura is not possible because the Hindus are not living in the same village, although the indirect influences from the vicinity Hindu population cannot be checked. The most interesting form of acculturation is present in the village Agoya where Santals are more in number than the Hindus. In such circumstance the flow of culture is directed from the Hindus to the Santals, but not in reverse direction. As a result, a good deal of culture change is observed among the Santals in which Hindu traits are merged.

Unlike Christianity or Islam, the mechanism of conversion is neither present among the Hindus nor among the tribals, specially Santals in the present case. About conversion, without going into the details, a few comments, based on observations may be made. Conversion is made to an individual or a group through compulsion of varying degree and thereby the concerned individuals or a group is converted. The other way is just opposite. An individual or a group expresses a desire for conversion and is finally converted. About the first process there is a chance of loss. In such circumstance it is not known to what extent the converted follows the final religion, at least during the stage of initial generation. In the second case of self-imposed conversion, the factor responsible for the same can never be identified. Without going into the details, the operation of the complex of inferiority can never be set aside.

Both among the Hindus and these Santals there is seldom any entry of the converted, barring a few cases. On the other hand, among both the groups the occurrence of conversion into other religions is met with. The marked examples may be presented from the converted Christians both from the Hindus and the Santals. May not be with chronology, but definitely with population of religious group the flexibility is present. For a larger population, the aerial coverage is high which leads to environmental diversity. In coping with the respective environmental conditions some amount of difference with regard to religion cannot be absolutely absent. In case of a particular religion with enormous population, simply individual or group variation may lead to discrete differences. Among the Santal Christians, despite conversion the original religious traits are present as vestigeal traits, Such condition does not play much on the Hindus who have been converted to Christianity. Among two religions, of the Hindus and the Santals, the above feature of similarity is important to note.

As mentioned earlier, religion is more an idea and/or a belief instead of its material existence. In cases, especially with rites and rituals, there are certain material manifestations, either in subdued or expressive forms. Within the universe of the present study, distinctions among the locales are found to be present. As a result, the interactions between two religions, viz. the Hindus and the Santals, are not absolutely equal. Before dealing with interactions, both of process and product, spontaneous form of change is always pre-

sent, although variability with acceleration is met with. Among the forenoted two religions, the Hindu religion is placed on a higher level, as represented by different individuals, in the hierarchical system. This may be accounted for as one of the basic reasons for which some of the religious traits of the Hindus percolate within the broad framework of the Santal religion. On the basis of observations and case studies it is revealed that the Hindu religious traits made an entry among the Santals, but it does not penetrate into the basic core of the Santal religion. In other words those traits of Hindu religion may be considered as a kind of extra accumulation or accretion on the Santal religion, without the least distortion of the latter. Such form of operation is seldom observed in case of the Hindu religion.

Hypothetically, if two religions are different from each other, the probability of disagreement and even conflict cannot be ruled out. This contradiction may be avoided if the traits of one religion do not disturb the core characters of other religion. This is observed among the Santals in their religious ideologies and activities.

It is quite obvious that religion is connected with various facets of life, both of individual and community comprising economy, culture, society, education etc. Manifestations of religion on the above mentioned considerations should be dealt with separately, either of individual or of community. In majority of the cases, the above noted factors are related to one another. As a matter of fact, the total impact is the compound product of all the facets.

It is true that religion is undergoing changes, more with manifestations and operations compared to concept and ideology. Change of this nature is observed to a greater extent among the Hindus. For such shift their total socio-cultural, economic and educational character are playing significant roles. The same characters are not strong enough among the Santals. Besides this factor, the other issues concerned with shifts may be explained in terms of the great population size and wide distribution. In the present situation, instead of the total Hindu population of India, emphasis has been laid on only Bengali Hindu population, more precisely in the locales under consideration.

In the socio-cultural hierarchy, Hindus are placed on a higher level than the Santals. As a result, the expectation of influence among the

Santals by the Hindus is more and probability of reversal mechanism is absolutely least. This does not mean that the Santals have been Hinduised and the traits which have entered into the cultural matrix of the Santals are mostly need based and due to impact of Hindu population of very high numerical dimension. Unlike Christians the Hindus have made no effort to convert the Santals into Hindus. This may be accounted for as the proximal similarity between the two religions. On the basis of close observations on the Santals it has also been found that in stray cases when Hindu girls are married to Santals there is a good deal of change and in due course she is following the Santal religion. No reports are available so far indicating that a Santal woman is married to a Bengali Hindu young man.

Epilogue

The Santals are trying to keep the religion almost unaltered. This is also possible because there is hardly any conflict and contradiction between Hindu and Santal religions. It is worthwhile to mention that both the religions are found in coexistence and the interplay between them is not absolutely devoid of. The minimum conflict between two religious groups have never occurred because impositions of one religion on another is so far absent. Away from the domain of religion there is an appreciable impact of the Hindus on the Santals.

The level of change among the Santals is found on the basis of economy, education and profession. Individuals with higher elevation on the above mentioned trait are not only close to the Hindu religion but also with the lifestyle of the Hindus. On the basis of the observations made it is apprehended that the identity of religion of the Santals will be there of course with some amount of change and in the mean time the accelerated change within the Hindu religion will keep a safe distance between the two religions.

Existence of two religions in an area may lead to simultaneous and parallel progress as of Hindu and Santal religion. On the contrary the heterogeneity turns homogenous with the imposition of another religious group(s), as often found between Christian and Santal religions. It is suggested that detailed work along this line with the inclusion of three religions as Hindu, Santal and Christianity will give rise to a comprehensive account on change of religion and so also the factors responsible for the same.