

It to have been
massacred by
shaivites



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It was in reaction to certain practices in the Vedic religion that led the Buddha to evolve a new path of religious practice emphasising on compassion and avoidance of elaborate and expensive rituals.

Almost contemporaneously to Buddhism, Jainism too preached a way of life different from the older orthodox faith (or dharma, for it had not come to be called by the name of Hinduism then). There were several converts to the new faiths. Even monarchs adopted the new faiths—Chandragupta Maurya embraced Jainism and Ashoka's espousal to Buddhism is well known.

There is not much information about the numbers adopting the new religions, but they must have been considerable enough to make the orthodox aware of the need for debate and even change in their own religion. There are records of active debates between Vedic scholars and the bhikshu and shramanes. There were also violent encounters between followers of the different faiths.

Jains are reported to have been massacred by Shaivites in the south; skirmishes also took place between the Jains and the Vaishnavs. Overall, however, considering the vastness of the country and its truly long history, these violent outbursts in matters of religion could be easily dismissed as rare occurrences. The trend has been to tolerate and discuss and to reform. The debate between Buddhist and Brahmanical faiths continued to the day of Adi Shankara who revolutionised the way to the re-establishment of Vedic religion—ironically, he was called a Buddhist in disguise.

It was the ability to look inward, think things out and adapt to new conditions and demands by reforming what existed earlier, in the process imbibing

some of the features of the newer religions and philosophies that Hinduism was able to survive for so long. Indeed, it was Hinduism's capacity for absorption that led to the virtual disappearance of Buddhism from the land of its birth: the Buddha was quietly absorbed into the Hindu pantheon as an avatar of Vishnu. Religious freedom has always been available to people residing in the region now called India. People could practise the faith of their choice and the preachers could preach their ideas and made people convert their way of thinking. Ramanujacharya managed to bring over to his view several followers of Jainism in his day. Basaveshwara drew persons from all castes to become Veerashaivas.

As for propagation, religious ideas spread mainly through that means. Ashoka sent Buddhist missions across the areas. Hinduism was also propagated beyond the boundaries of its birth: the Hindu- kingdoms of South-east Asia where the ruins of the temples built by those kings survive to this day. The Ramayana dance drama of the Indonesian style is world famous. There was thus no 'ban' on conversion at any time in India.

When Islam first came to India, through the Arab traders on the western coast, there was no confrontation. It was when the Muslims came as conquerors and conversions took place under duress that there was resentment and reaction. However, many such conversions are shortlived. Once the conqueror's sword is lifted, the convert slips back into his old ways.

The vast majority of Hindus, who had remained faithful to their religion despite defeat in battle, saw the converts as people who had betrayed their faith and country by going over to the side of the conqueror. But in more

settled times the tendency to debate and reform took over. The Sufi tradition and Bhakti movement, one might say, were a development of the mutual influence of Hindu and Islamic ideas. In the court of Akbar, there was discussion among representatives of different religious groups. Christianity is said to have come to India in the very first year of Christian era. The religious tolerance of the time allowed the first Christians to live in Kerala and practise their faith. Missionaries came to India long before colonial rule was established. But there were no crusades in India, and there were few, if any, attacks on the missionaries as there were in China, for example, in the nineteenth century, when missionaries were driven out from the interior.

Hinduism responded in its typical way: by offering a challenge through public debate. Though the colonial rulers did not support the missionaries officially, more out of expediency than because of principles, of course, indirect support was available to them. However, if we are to be objective about the missionaries' work in the colonial days, we have to admit the positive aspects of their presence. We have to recognise the pioneering work they did in the field of education and medical support. Interaction with Christian ideas gave rise to our own socio-reform movements. The "faults" that the Christian missionaries found in the Hinduism of the day led to introspection by the thinking Hindus. It was the intellectual ferment that led to a rejuvenation of Hindu thought and the abolition of obnoxious practices like sati.

Conversions, however, took place: some were famous, such as that of Pandita Ramabai; most were from the poorer oppressed classes, as it was in the case of Islam and even Buddhism earlier. The main reason was not

inducement. Perhaps, it could even be questioned, if there was a complete change of belief and conviction. But the converts did seek self-respect which they were convinced they would gain by joining the other faith. Some years back there were a large number of conversions to Buddhism in the wake of Ambedkar's adoption of that faith. Again, that was in search of self-respect which the converts felt was not going to be theirs in their original faith. More recently, there were reports of mass conversions in Meenakshipuram, in Tamil Nadu, this time to Islam.

Interviews ten years later by newspaper reporters establish that the converts are not all that well-off because of their decision to convert; yet many are interested in 'reconversion'. They are happy because they are no longer considered social outcasts. So, there has got to be more than economic inducement involved to make one change one's religion. It is quite another matter whether all caste differences and oppression disappear for all those who convert from Hinduism to other faiths.

Reports from Dangs in Gujarat, where there was trouble in 1999 over conversions, suggest that there are other dimensions to the trouble. Christian missionary activities have provided the tribals with schooling and health facilities. The conversions have certainly shown an increase in numbers if we go by the figures provided by the Socio-Economic Review, a budget publication of the state government. Even in respect of the overall growth rate of population in the state during the decade, the growth of the Christian population, particularly in the tribal-dominated districts of south Gujarat, has been significant. So, probably, there is some truth in the contention that conversions have taken place in the state, especially in the

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tribal areas. However, there is nothing to prove that the conversions have been forced or through 'inducement'.

The questions that arise are: Is it right to convert at all? Is it right to call for a ban on conversion, as some groups have been doing? We must have a brief look at what the Constitution says about the freedom of religion before we can come to a conclusion on this. Articles 25 to 29 are concerned with the right to the freedom of religion. Article 25 reads: (1) Subject to public order, morality and health and to the other provisions of this part, all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely express, practise and propagate religion. (2) Nothing in this Article shall affect the operation of any existing law or prevent the state from making any law (a) regulating or restricting economic, financial, political or other secular activity which may be associated with religious practice; (b) providing for social welfare and reform or throwing open of Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of the Hindus. Article 26 reads: Subject to public order, morality and health, every religious denomination or any section thereof shall have the right—(a) to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; (b) to manage its own affairs in matters of religion; (c) to own and acquire movable and immovable property; and (d) to administer such property in accordance with law. Article 27 and 28 provide, among other things, that no taxes shall be levied for promoting any particular religion and that no person attending any educational institution recognised by the state or aided by it, shall be forced to receive any religious instruction.

Article 29 provides that no citizen can be denied admission to any educational institution run or aided by the state on grounds of religion, caste, etc. It is also important to recall the debates that took place in the Constituent Assembly before the right to the freedom of religion was enshrined in the Constitution. Cutting across their religious affiliations, and firmly putting the trauma of partition behind them, the members decided to include the right to propagate one's religion in the freedom. A person of staunch Hindu belief such as K. M. Munshi said that the word 'propagate' was a fundamental part of the tenets of the Christians, and thus they set great store by that right and not because they wanted to indulge in aggressive conversion. Another member of the Constituent Assembly, Krishnaswami Bharati, stated that the Christian community had not transgressed the limits of legitimate propagation of religious views, and it was for other religious communities to emulate the Christian and propagate their own religions as well.

Some years ago, the Supreme Court dealt with the issue of conversion. A Constitution Bench of the court in a group of related cases in 1977 ruled that what Article 25(1) grants is not the right to convert another person to one's own religion, but to transmit or spread one's religion by an exposition of its tenets. The Article, the court pointed out, guarantees freedom of conscience to every citizen, and not merely to the followers of any particular religion. Any effort to purposely undertake to convert another person to one's own religion would "impinge on the 'freedom of conscience' guaranteed to all the citizens of the country alike." It further said: "What is freedom for one is freedom for the other in equal measure, and there can therefore be no such

thing as a fundamental right to convert any person to one's own religion.”

When some forces talk of banning missionaries, they conveniently forget that these missionaries have spread education and brought health facilities to people in remote areas, worked selflessly with leprosy patients and provided shelter to the aged and the destitute. It is their faith that inspires them to do so. True, some of them have denigrated Hindu gods and customs in the process but what stops the Hindu groups to work patiently with those very tribal's to undo what they perceive as harmful? It is also to be admitted that enlightened Hindus in the past have heard the criticism of followers of other religions, accepted some of it and tried to reform Hinduism.

Dialogue is the only way out for promoting better understanding between conflicting groups. As the spread of wrong information is largely responsible for misunderstanding, dissemination of correct information is necessary to contain the conflict. Rituals, theologies and institutions are unique to every religion, and this often leads to misunderstandings, as each religion asserts the superiority of its own set of rituals and institutions. The basis of dialogue should be a wish to understand the other's point of view and respect for the other's integrity.

The aim should be to promote the spirit of accommodation and adjustment to minimise conflict in society. Coercive conversions can never be permitted. But that is not the issue.

As to inducement, it is a difficult matter to prove. What exactly constitutes inducement? Money for the soul? Can souls be bought? Or are the amenities like medical assistance and education to be included among ' inducement'?

Then there is also the issue of self-respect that the dalits and the tribal's have sought in changing their religion. Can one really demarcate the point where mercenary inducement begins and emotional inducement stops or for that matter whether there is an exercise of the right to the freedom of conscience? Banning conversion is a two-edged weapon: it may effectively stop missionary activities of some kind, but it will also cut at the root of a vital freedom—the freedom to choose religion of one's choice, the freedom of conscience, etc. If public order is disrupted as a result of some exercising the freedom to propagate their religion, the onus would be on the authorities to first establish the perpetrators of the disorder and then take suitable action against them as prescribed by law. Hindus, who are offended by any conversion that they seem to have been bought or forced, should approach the courts and not play into the hands of blind zealots or criminals in the garb of patriots and indulge in the kind of violence that brings only shame to the nation in the eyes of all. The state has no business to intervene in matters of faith; its duty is to provide its citizens with social and physical security.

If people in remote areas, which are also economically undeveloped, are turning to the schools and availing other welfare facilities provided by missionaries of one or other religion, this is because the state has done little to provide them with alternatives. It would be best, perhaps, if instead of clamouring for the expulsion of foreign missionaries and the stopping of funds from abroad to Christian organisations, the Hindu activists should turn their attention and energy to the task of giving the deprived sections of our population, especially the tribal's and the Scheduled Castes, a feeling of

equality with the other sections of the Hindu population. Let them devote their time to the construction of good schools and hospitals in the remote areas, and let them work among the leprosy-afflicted and other neglected sections of the society. It is only then that these deprived sections will regain their faith in their original gods and not seek new gods who care for them. There is one aspect that most debaters of this topic fail to notice.

Revo Valson Thampu has brought out this point: “ Scripturally, none can ‘ convert’ another human being. Stopping mercenary conversions, if indeed they happen, should be a greater priority for the Christian community than for their detractors. Seeing this as symptomatic of a national disease in which everything including human flesh and service can be bought and sold in the market should be a priority for the nation as a whole. A debate should be distinguished not by the decibels it generates, but by a shared quest for truth in order to uphold and practise justice.”