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Rethinking the Imagined Community: Changing Religious Identity of Tribes in Chotanagpur during the First Half of Twentieth Century

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Introduction- This paper intends to study how the religious community is determined by the geographical expression and by the political boundary. In colonial Indian census, there was a category of tribal religion which disappeared after political freedom of India. All non- Muslim and non Christian tribals were assumed as a Hindu in post colonial census. The assimilation of the faith of minority by the religious majority through the imagined political boundary or so called the national movement is part of my research endeavour. I will try to figure out how the political boundary became a determining force in reconstructing a religious community or how the faith of tribals was replaced by Hinduism. In this paper I will focus on two tribes of Chotanagpur i.e. Munda and Oraon. How the faith of tribal in general and the religion of Mundas and the Oraons in particular got changed through the concept of Indianisation will be the key point of discussion in this paper. It would be interesting to know how far the dominant majoritarian politics of Hinduism incorporated and assimilated the tribal faith into Hinduism through the 'imagined native religion' which perhaps was none other than Hinduism.

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Samer Moiz Rizvi

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper intends to study how the religious community is determined by the geographical expression and by the political boundary. In colonial Indian census, there was a category of tribal religion which disappeared after political freedom of India. All non-Muslim and non-Christian tribals were assumed as a Hindu in post colonial census. The assimilation of the faith of minority by the religious majority through the imagined political boundary or so called the national movement is part of my research endeavour. I will try to figure out how the political boundary became a determining force in reconstructing a religious community or how the faith of tribals was replaced by Hinduism. In this paper I will focus on two tribes of Chotanagpur i.e. Munda and Oraon. How the faith of tribal in general and the religion of Mundas and the Oraons in particular got changed through the concept of Indianisation will be the key point of discussion in this paper. It would be interesting to know how far the dominant majoritarian politics of Hinduism incorporated and assimilated the tribal faith into Hinduism through the 'imagined native religion' which perhaps was none other than Hinduism.

According to Romila Thapar, "religious identity tends to iron out diversity and insists on conformity, for it is only through a uniform acceptance of the religion that it can best be used for political ends. The attempt is always to draw in as many people as possible since numbers enhance the power of the communal group and are crucial in a mechanical view of democracy."¹ In the early nineteenth century, it was still not uncommon for references to be made to "Hindu Christians or "Hindu Muslims" as distinct from those who were not native born or culturally indigenous to the Indian subcontinent.² Hindu came to be the concept used by people who have tried to give greater unity to the extreme cultural diversities which are native to the

continent. Such efforts, even when they have involved only one way of looking at different kinds of cultural phenomena in India, have almost invariably been part of some institutional, ideological, or political agenda. As instruments for drawing all of India together, the program behind each effort has sometimes been overt and explicit; at other times, covert and hidden; or even, albeit rarely, simultaneously conscious and unconscious.³

Chotanagpur had witnessed the activity of many Hindu organizations like Hindu Mahasabha, Arya Samaj, Shradhanand Trust, Sharadhanand Dalitodhar Mission, Arya Pratinidhi Sabha and Bihar Navyuvak Society.⁴ The Arya Samaj was established at Ranchi in 1894 primarily with a view of propagating Vedic Philosophy as propounded by Dayananda Saraswati. It arranged lectures and discourses through its preachers in some areas of Chotanagpur and people of other faiths were admitted into the Arya Samaj fold through *shuddhi* (purification). This purification ritual is resorted to by upper-caste Hindus affected by 'polluting' contact. But the Arya Samaj used it to reconvert—that is, they reinstated their "ex-Hindus" who had become Christians, Muslims, or Sikhs.⁵

As institutional efforts to defend the old order or to reform it, many of these organizations became radically and self consciously "Hindu." Defensive, exclusivist, fundamentalistic, militant, or revivalist, their purpose was to "purify" the "sacred soil" from pollution and to do so by means of radical "reconversion" (*shuddhi*). Attitudes toward and ethnic or religious community not deemed to be properly Hindu, meaning not legitimately native to *Bharat Mata* became increasingly and intolerant, if not violent.⁶ Babu Jagat Narayan Lal, wrote in the newspaper 'Indian Nation'.

The fact that Christian Missions have concentrated practically the greatest part of their immense resources and energy upon them should waken the Hindus community to a sense of its duty, and the fact that they have already trained and prepared a formidable army of native preachers for the

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¹ Thapar, Romila (1998) *Imagined Religious Community?*(New Delhi) 3-4

² Frykenberg, R. E. (2009) *Constructions of Hinduism* (New Delhi), 5

³ Ibid, 5-6

⁴ Sahay, K.N. (1981) 'The Hindu Impact on Tribal', in P. Dash Sharma, (ed) *The Passing Scene in Chotanagpur* (Ranchi) 59

⁵ Jaffrelot, Christophe (2007) *Hindu Nationalism*, (Delhi) 233

⁶ Frykenberg, R.E. (2009) 24

purpose makes it imperative that public-spirited Hindus and rich and large-hearted Hindus donors who love their religion and culture as deeply as their country should turn their attention to this great and urgent problem. The Hindu Sabha and Hindu Mission have been doing something. The All India Swami Shradhanand Memorial Trust, with its meager resources yielding hardly more than an income of a few hundred rupees per month has been persuaded to turn its attention to this question and it is some consolation to note that it has taken it up. But, what can its limited resources avail in face of the whirlwind campaign of Christianity.

The fact that in the district of Ranchi alone, nearly three lakhs of Oraons and Mundas have been converted into Christianity, that in one thana thirty-one thousand out of thirty-seven thousand Oraons have become Christians and in another fifteen thousand out of seventeen thousand have turned Christians and that the conditions of several other thanas of the district is also similar, should be enough to open the eyes of the Hindus. I hope the Hindu community and Hindu institutions of every denomination will wake up before it is too late to save the situation.⁷

Labelling themselves Hindu, they saw themselves as defenders of Hinduism. These Hindu movements, in varying degrees, blended together nativist elements which are peculiar to many if not all, radical conversion movements and they did this with a particular kind of nationalistic fervour.⁸ Hindu identity was defined by those who were part of this national consciousness and drew on their own idealized image of themselves resulting in an upper-caste, *brahmana*-dominated identity.⁹

In the Ninth Bihar Provincial Hindu Conference, Thebla Oraon moved the following resolution:

1. This conference is painfully conscious of the alarming progress of the proselytising activities of the Christian Missions in Chotanagpur, carried on and intensified with the aid of elaborate and well financed schemes offering inducements to the unwary aboriginal Hindus and records its empathetic opinion that a stage has been reached when all Hindu bodies regardless of their creed and complexion should collaborate and pool all their resources to counteract this move and stop this progressive decline of the Hindu population by every possible means at their disposal.
2. This conference directs the working committee of the Bihar Provincial Hindu Sabha to take the matter immediately in hand and also solicit the help and guidance of the All India Hindu Mahasabha on this issue. This conference directs the working committee to constitute a local sub-committee consisting of suitable persons to keep a close watch on the situation and advise the working committee in this matter.

3. This conference declares that all tribes inhabiting Chotanagpur be classified for administrative purpose under a common name 'Adibasi' who are and have always been Hindus.
4. This conference empathetically asserts that all special rights, privileges, protective laws and ameliorative measures calculated to benefit such tribes should be available exclusively to those who remain in the ancestral Hindu fold and retain their traditions. This conference further declares that these special privileges should not be available to those who have forsaken their ancestral faith.¹⁰

So, the term Hinduism is not only religious but political also. The fact that there is no clear marker between what is religious and what is political (that is, nation) has been kept deliberating vague. This confusion has become wonderfully convenient in serving the many kinds of interests and purposes of chauvinisms which have arisen in the twentieth century. As a case of synecdoche, such obfuscation, sometimes crude and sometimes insidious and subtle, has been made to serve an imperialistic ideal giving a common name to everything that exists within ritual and sacred boundaries of "the Motherland" or "the Nation."¹¹ Anti-conversion sentiments received a major stimulus from Savarkar's very far-reaching and influential definition of 'Hindu' in 1923 which uniquely combined 'Pitribhumi' and 'Punyabhumi' (i.e. fatherland with holy-land). Through a very effective appropriation of nationalism by Hindu majoritarianism, the indigenous origin of religious beliefs, practices, or institutions was made the supreme criterion for nationalism. It became easy to brand Muslims and Christians as alien and unpatriotic by definition, a charge particularly effective against Christians in the colonial era due to their religious affinity with the British rulers.¹²

Hindu nationalism and the conversion issue are intimately related. In his essay, *Hindutva*, Vinayak Damodar Savarka, defines a Hindu as a person who is Indian by ethnicity, national allegiance, and religious affiliation.¹³ This ideology crystallized largely in reaction to the proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries. Socio-religious reform movements such as Brahma Samaj and revivalist Hindu Movements like the Arya Samaj were partly formed to cope with frequent aggressive religious propaganda. The latter initiated a Hindu conversion technique which was in fact borrowed from the Christian missionaries but shaped along the lines of a traditional ritual, called *Suddhi*.¹⁴

¹⁰ Patna State Archives, Ninth Bihar Provincial Conference Report, Ranchi, 15th April 1940

¹¹ Thapar, Romila (1998) 26

¹² Sarkar, Sumit (2002) *Beyond Nationalist Frame* (Delhi) 235

¹³ Long, Jeffery .D. (2007) *A Vision for Hinduism* (London) 174

¹⁴ Jaffrelot, Christophe (2007) 233

⁷ A Path of Caste Hindu Deplored, *Indian Nation News Paper*, Ranchi, 8-7-1935.

⁸ Frykenberg, R.E. (2009) 24

⁹ Thapar, Romila (1998) 26

It cannot be denied that Hindu organisations made a determined and focused attempt to 'Hinduise' the tribals. Surprisingly, the activities of the Hindu missionaries among the tribals had by and large been ignored by all scholars. In fact some of them like S.L.Doshi have totally denied the proselytizing activities of the Hindus. Perhaps he was convinced by Gandhi according to whom, "Hinduism is the most tolerant religion because it is non-proselytizing."¹⁵In a way Gandhi was supporting the concept that "Hindu is always born and not made"¹⁶and it has nothing to do with missionary activities. A question then emerges that if a Hindu is always born and not made, and if Hinduism is not a proselytizing religion, then why was Arya Samaj established? What was the need of *suddhi* movement? Not only this, there are a number of movements proudly bearing the word 'Mission' in their titles. For example, Ramkrshna Mission, Chinmaya Mission, Divine Light Mission, and so forth. One of the publications of Chinmaya Mission about Shankracharya bears the title: *Shankara the Missionary*.¹⁷Furthermore, Sumit Sarkar has posed a very pertinent question that if Hinduism is not a proselytizing religion, then where did all the Buddhists of ancient India go?¹⁸Sarkar argues that from the late 19th century onward, expansion of Hinduism directed towards the tribals became more organized through *Shuddhi* and *paravartan*.¹⁹Some Hindu ideologues like Gokul Chand Narang supported the Gandhi's understanding of Hindu missionary and proselytizing activities and said that Hinduism grew up without a rival. He argues that when it was flourishing, there was no other religion in existence. According to him, this fact and the general trend of Hindu doctrines account for the absence of a zeal for conversion and a regular system, propaganda or mission for proselytization.²⁰Hence, Narang questions the very existence of other religions such as, Buddhism, Jainism and for that matter all tribal faith.

The idea of a single and ancient religion gradually spread and solidified, becoming dominant and pervasive. Thus, it created a perpetuated two accompanying myths. Both of these myths were expedient, if not essential, to the continued political integration of India in colonial rule and both are no less expedient for the same political ends today. The very first one was the belief that Hinduism is a benign, "inclusivistic," and singular religion, epitomizing all that is eclectic, syncretistic, and tolerant in human behavior, doctrine, and ritual; and the second was the belief that Hinduism is a religion of majority and it represents the

vast majority of India. Both the constructions had served to incorporate all indigenous population of India as being an integral part of Hinduism.²¹For the construction of Hindu Nationalism the *Sacred Books of the East* from has also served as a textual foundation. This, particular Hinduism, constructed by Company's Orientalist pundits had inspired nationalist leaders from Gandhi to Nehru.²²

The conversion of tribals into Islam and Christianity attracted the attention of Hindu organizations. Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, one of the propounders of cultural nationalism and the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha, directed all his efforts to bring tribals into the Hindu fold. Savarkar wrote "Every person is a Hindu who regards and owns this Bharat Bhumi, this land from the Indus to the seas, as his fatherland as well as Holyland, e.i. the land of the origin of his religion. Consequently the so called aboriginal and hill tribes also are Hindus because India is their Fatherland as well as their Holyland of whatever form of worship they follow."²³ His enthusiasm towards the conversion movement helped in spreading of *shuddhi* movement in various tribal areas. The Shuddhi movement was not just a reconversion movement but also a movement against the Muslims and Christians.²⁴Theoretically the critique of *shuddhi* movement is not only on the basis of conversion of the followers of different faiths into Hinduism, but also the fact that the movement was based on the false assumption that the tribal populations that lived within the political boundary of India were Hindu before their conversion to Islam and Christianity. It ignores the existence of the tribals' own faiths. Through this they tried to redefine the history and the faith of tribals, and further imposed their own faith on the tribal community. Here, the dominance of the politically powerful communities over the less powerful ones is apparent. This thinking had clearly opened the space for the coercion of the tribal population. The motive of *suddhi* movement was to engage Hindus in missionary work for conversion.

An analysis of some of the primary sources sheds light on their methods and motives of these missionaries. There is evidence that they were not only using propaganda but also force for converting tribals to Hinduism. N. Baksi, Deputy Commissioner of Palamau wrote a letter to the Chief Secretary of Bihar and Orissa where he named Chandrika Prasad and Dharam Vir Vidyalankar for using force to convert aboriginals to Hinduism.

"On the 22nd of May, Balu Oraon lodged a First Information Report at Police Station Balumath alleging that Chandrika Prasad, a Hindu Mahasabha worker and others had

¹⁵ Pattanaik, D.D. (1998) *Hindu Nationalism in India* (Delhi) 10.

¹⁶ Mathew, C.V. (1999) *The Saffron Mission* (Delhi) 4.

¹⁷ Ibid, 18.

¹⁸ Sarkar, Sumit (2002) 221

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Narang, Sir Gokul Chand (1966) *Glorious Hinduism* (New Delhi) 92

²¹ Frykenberg, R.E. (2009) 17

²² Ibid, 18

²³ Savarkar, V.D. (2002) *Hindu Rashtra Darshan* cited in Koenraad Elst, *Who is Hindu* (Delhi) 168

²⁴ Smith, D. (2003) *Hinduism and Modernity*, (Oxford) 187

forcibly cut his Tiki and converted him into Hinduism. Charge sheet under section 341 I.P.C. against Chandrika Prasad and two others has been submitted and case is pending in the court of the Sub Divisional Officer, Latehar. No action has been taken against Chandrika Prasad to prevent him from carrying on his missionary work, and he is in fact still carrying it on".²⁵

The First Information Report lodged in Balmuth Police Station was not an isolated case but there is more evidence which shows that Hindu Missionaries were using force to convert tribals. In a different case, the secretary of the Shradanand Trust, Pandit Dharmbir Vidyalkar along with the same Chandrika Prasad Singh, the prominent leader of Hindu Mahasabha of undivided Bihar, were named in a FIR for using force to convert tribals into Hinduism.

"On the 22nd of June a First Information Report was lodged against Pandit Dharmbir Vidyalkar, secretary of the Shradanand Trust, and against Babu Chandrika, at Chandwa police station by one Budhu Oraon on the ground that they had forcibly converted him to Hinduism. No action has been taken to preclude Pandit Dharmbir or Babu Chandrika Prasad from carrying on their missionary work".²⁶

In both the cases there were no arrests or any action against the culprits suggesting the organized political power of Hindu missionaries. This forcible conversion was not a sudden reaction against Christianity but part of hatred campaigns which were carried out by the national and local level Hindu leaders over the time. V.D. Savarkar tried to fuel the 'Hindu sentiments' against Christianity and Islam. He said, "The Hindu catholicity of outlook and the accompanying tolerance has been a great asset, but now-a-days it is also showing the need for revision, especially in the face of hostile and pseudo-secularist forces who tried to exploit this virtue as a weakness. Time has come to make an effort to take back those who belong to this soil into Hindu fold."²⁷ These provocative thoughts of Savarkar had a disastrous consequence on the followers of other faiths. Forcible conversion started in many tribal areas and Chotanagpur was also not untouched by this practice.

Coercion was one of the methods of conversion adopted by the Hindu missionaries, which is unfortunately neglected by the historians in the case of Mundas and Oraons in the region prior to 1947. Apart from the evidence of coercion such as above, there is also evidence of the nature of propaganda work that was being carried on. A play in Hindi titled, "*Hindu Ho Jaonga*" (I Will Become a Hindu), was published in

Gaya in 1929 by Chandrika Prasad Verma. The play has three primary characters. Etta Oraon had a son called Shukra Oraon. Shukra became a Christian twenty years ago and was renamed Yohan. Yohan wanted to become a Hindu again. The padre (a Westerner) received this information and came over to try to dissuade him from doing so. The other side of the argument that Shukra was essentially a Hindu and should formally become one was maintained by the author himself.²⁸

Padre: Yohan! You are an understanding man. Why do you want to leave Christianity?

Yohan: I am an understanding man that is why I am leaving Christianity. Twenty years have passed, yet I am not yet a true Christian. I do not see any novelty in Christianity. Sir! You have failed in your arguments with those who read the Hindu scriptures. I believe that Christianity is not a proper religion.

Padre: How have I not made a true Christian of You?

Yohan: If you had, then by now I would have had white as yours is. A pure Christian is white. If the skin is not white, then how can I be a pure Christian? Jesus Christ was white. A pure Christian should be white.

Padre: It is the will of God whether one is black or white.

Yohan: If it is the will of God to be black or white, then it must be his will that I am black. Lord Vishunu, Lord Rama and Lord Krishna are all dark. I am black, therefore I will be a pure Hindu. Oh! I have 'made a bad mistake. Being a koel (a black bird). How much honour a black koel Gets! The white egret which eats fish is always cursed as a murderer. Twenty years have passed, yet no white Christian has ever offered a daughter in marriage, nor is my houses like their bungalows. I have no motor car nor do I have money like they do. I call myself accursed that I have left the religion of my ancestors for this religion that does not give me anything. I am ashamed to call myself Yohan and to call my father Etta Oraon.

Padre: yes, we have been discussing the issue of the marriage of the daughters and sisters of the black padres.

Yohan: No black Christian will give his daughter to a padre. You should first give your daughters to black Christians. You cannot be clever about this. As you have given your teachings so must you give your daughters?

Padre: See, Yohan! You are not capable of managing the daughters of the padres.

Yohan: Why not?

²⁵ Patna State Archives, Home Department, Political Branch, File No. 233, 28th August 1935, 7

²⁶ Patna State Archives, Home Department, Political Branch, File No. 233, 28th August 1935, 7

²⁷ Pattanaik, D. D. (1998) xiv-xv

²⁸ Ghosh, Abhik (2006) *The World of the Oraon* (Delhi) 230

Padre: The daughters of a padre are used to bungalows, cars, English wine, good clothes, furniture, etc., because they are daughters of wealthy men.

Yohan: Why are they wealthy? Why am I not wealthy? This is why I say that you have not made me a pure Christian, otherwise I would have been rich. You have made me a Christian and left me in this country. You should take Christians to Europe. If I have left the religion of this country, I should not remain here shamelessly. You, too, should not eat and drink from this country and yet separate the people of this country from their own brothers.

Padre: What is, then, your decision?

Yohan: When the color of the skin does not change; when there is to be no marriage with the daughters of the padre; when I cannot be rich and intelligent as you are; when I have to live in this country, then it is useless for me to remain a Christian. Clearly, I should become a Hindu.

Padre: Hindu religion is not true; Christianity is the true religion.

Yohan: I believe that Hindu religion is pure because it is vouched for by the Earth, the Sun and the Moon.

Padre: How's that?

Yohan: Has anyone ever gone to the Sun or the Moon to ask whether there will be an eclipse? No one has told us either. Yet astrology, which is a part of Hindu religion, says the truth about eclipses. The sunrise and sunset timings are also predicted. This is proof of the truth of Hindu religion. Can you present one proof of the truth of Christianity?

Padre: (quiet after this logical argument, To Yohan) Come to the bungalow, later. (Climbs into car and goes off, saddened.)

Yohan: (To me) Sir! Please purify me and turn me into a Hindu.²⁹

As we have seen earlier, the idea of fatherland is raised here again. Identity is tied to one's land, and cannot be transcended by an abstract conversion of religion. Yohan, in the play, believes that Christians should be in Europe as Hindus should be in India, and that if he is a Christian, he should be transported to, and have an equal share in the bounties of the West. He thinks he has been compromised through this conversion to Christianity and he must take on the dominant religion of the land. This dialogue between these two characters clearly establishes the inseparable connection between land and faith, and reasserts Savarkar's idea.

Chandrika Prasad, publisher of this document and the third character of this conversation, is clearly

using all kinds of propaganda to justify his argument. He not only used economic and social status of tribals after conversion but also the colour of their skin. This is an evidence of how the self-perception of the tribals about their identity and their insecurities were being manipulated. It is interesting to note that in the entire play, the focus is not on what Hinduism can offer to the tribals but on what Christianity cannot offer to them. Hence, both the motives of conversion as well as methods appear to be driven by an anti-Christian feeling rather than being guided by some altruistic moral need to better the lives of the tribals through Hinduism.

Gandhi had taken almost the same line as Chandrika Prasad but in a more subtle way. In Young India he said, "There was a time when I was wavering between Hinduism and Christianity. When I recovered my balance of mind, I felt that to me salvation was possible only through the Hindu religion and my faith in Hinduism grew deeper and more enlightened."³⁰In asserting that "salvation was possible only through Hindu religion" he very cleverly imposed the superiority of Hinduism over Christianity. This was nothing but propaganda against Christianity. Being a great politician, Gandhi was propagating Hinduism in little different way of Chandrika Prasad. Chandrika Prasad had not said anything about what Hinduism can give to the tribals and his main focus was what Christianity cannot offer. Gandhi, however, lured his reader with the candy of salvation, which was according to him only possible through Hinduism. Despite the fact that the shuddhi movement was carried out by the Arya Samaj and consequently riots had taken place in many areas, Gandhi had shown his love for the Samaj and on many occasions appreciated the great role played by the Arya Samaj.³¹ The antiquity of Hinduism had also become one of the propaganda points to show its superiority over other religions. According to Gandhi, "...the Hindu has an age-old civilization. His civilization has passed through the experiences that the two recent ones (Muslims and Christians) are still passing through."³²We don't know about what experience Gandhi is talking about. Perhaps here he is trying to say that people should adopt Hinduism because it is more matured in the sense of its antiquity than the other two religions, and through experiences through the passage of a long period of time Hinduism is more evolved than Christianity and Islam.

Anti-Christian campaign was carried out by many Hindu organizations. They spread insecurity and therefore there was great agency in the matter of uniting 'Hindu sentiments' to counter Christianity.

³⁰ Young India, 21st April 1927 cited in D.D.Pattanaik, *Hindu Nationalism in India*, Delhi, 1998, 6.

³¹ Pattanaik, D.D. (1998) 7

³² Ibid, 11.

²⁹ Ghosh, Abhik (2006) 233-234



In a confidential letter to Merriman, Commissioner, Chotanagpur Division, the writer of the epistle says,

"It appears from the reports received that Jagat Narayan Lal and the Hindu Mahasabha are attempting to work up an anti-Christian and anti-missionary campaign in Palamau. It appears that he has also recently visited Khunti where he stayed at Sharadhanand Ashram".³³ In his reply Merriman said,

"The most important matter for report is Jagat Narayan's campaign for conversion of Christians. I refer to your D.O. no. 2519-C, of the 5th July 1935.

During the past fortnight Jagat Narayan has visited Ranchi district accompanied by Pandit Dharambir Vidyalkar, Secretary of the All India Shradhanand Trust and Chandradeo Narayan, Secretary of the Bihar Navyuvak Society. There were meetings and speeches at Lohardaga on the 27th June and at Ranchi on the 30th June. On the 30th the party also visited Khunti. Lohardaga and Khunti are the two places in the district where the Sharadhanand Trust has got schools. Jagat Narayan lamented Hindu sectarianism and urged Hindus to try to convert aboriginals instead of allowing them to become Christians. The party again visited Lohardaga on 1st July 1935 and the opening of at least 20 primary schools for aboriginals was discussed".³⁴

These facts give clear indications of the development of a campaign started in Palamau through Chandrika Prasad for the conversion of aboriginals. Perhaps it was the threat of Christianity which compelled Hindu missionaries to open schools for the aboriginals.

"Chandrika Prasad is reported to have been active in his campaign during the past fortnight but Baksi, Deputy Commissioner of Palamau thinks that there is a movement among the supporters of the Hindu Mahasabha to remove him from his preaching campaign. He claims 450 converts up to date. One Pandit Ramgobind Prasad, who is native of the Patna district and has been working in the Shradhanand Trust Ashram at Lohardaga for some 18th months, has been deputed to the newly opened branch of the Shradhanand Trust at Chandwa and is vigorously preaching in Chandwa and Balumath Police Station. He has good knowledge of Oraon and enlivens his meetings with a Harmonium. He is obviously a more suitable man from the Mahasabha point of view than Chandrika Prasad".³⁵

Certain facts can be deduced from the above report. Firstly, it is clear that various Hindu organisations like the Hindu Mahasabha and the Shradhanand Trust were cooperating in the use of manpower and resources for their mission in contrast to Christianity where different groups had been working more or less independently and sometimes even against each other.

Hence, we can see that they were trying to make an organised and united effort to woo the tribals. The use of music and of people conversant with tribal languages in preaching also shows that the Hindu missionary effort was not as half-hearted and unorganised as it has been portrayed by most of the scholars. It is also clear that besides force, they were using subtle ploys like music, plays and the use of their own language to attract the tribals. However, as far as the rendering of charitable service to the tribals is concerned, the two schools run by the Shradhanand trust mentioned in the above extract are the only activities of this kind for which evidence is available in the primary and secondary sources consulted for this research.

The prime motive and also the urgency felt by missionaries to spread Hindu influence among the tribals are also clear from the following extract. It is the statement of Babu Jagat Narayan Lal, published in the newspaper 'Indian Nation'.

Chotanagpur is already known as the stronghold of the Christian Missionaries. But the condition, which now prevails here, is simply appalling. The march of 5,400 converted Oraon and Munda Christians on the silver jubilee day of in the town of Ranchi alone was a sight which it will be difficult for the Hindus of the town to efface from their memory. Thana after than a and sub-division after sub-division in the districts of Chotanagpur are succumbing to the onslaughts of the Christian Missionaries who have trained and deputed hundreds and thousands of converted Christian preachers from amongst the Oraon, Munda and Santhals themselves through silent, sympathetic and continuous work of nearly 50 years, backed by immense resources to absorb as rapidly as possible, the remaining Hindus of their fraternity, several lakhs of them have been already converted, and the pace at which these conversions are now proceeding is alarming indeed.

While attention of the Hindus have been drawn to the problem of the 6 crores of untouchables, thanks to the noble efforts of lofty souls like Mahatma Gandhi, the late Swami Shradhanand, Lala Lajpat Rai, Pandit Malviya and of institutions like the Hindu Mahasabha, the Arya Samaj, the Harijan Sevak Sangha and others, the attentions of the Hindus yet remains to be drawn to the problem of redeeming and elevating crores of those hardy and tribal Hindus who live in the hills and the forests of our country and are designated variously as Kol, Bheels, Mundas, Oraons and others and misnamed aboriginals, instead of Hindus in the various districts and provinces and who, although neglected so long by their co-religionists, have continued to love and practice the Hindu religion and its various rites and ceremonies in their own way.³⁶

The above extract clearly showed the level of insecurity that had been aroused amongst the Hindu

³³ Patna State Archives, Home Department, Political Branch, File No.194, 5th July 1935, 3

³⁴ Patna State Archives, Home Department, Political Branch, File No.194, 12th July 1935, 8

³⁵ Patna State Archives, Home Department, Political Branch, File No.194, 12th August 1935, 16

organisations due to the rapid spread of Christianity among the tribals of Chotanagpur. Here, we can see an assumption by the Hindu organisations that the hitherto neglected tribals were actually Hindus. Although terms like 'redeeming' and 'elevating' have been used, the means by which this task could be achieved had not been thought as being worthy of mention. The focus was more on dissuading the tribals from becoming Christian rather than trying to improve their quality of life through Hinduism. Akshoy Kumar Dutta, Brahma editor of *Tattvabodhini Patrika* and possessing a considerable rationalist reputation asserted, "Even the women within the household have started turn Christian! Will we not wake up even after this terrible development?"³⁷ Hostile attitude towards Christianity and Christian preaching emerged amongst the orthodox segment of Hindus. In the work of Hindu Missionaries an aggressive spirit of resistance to Christianity was evident.³⁸

The Ninth Bihar Provincial Hindu Conference was organised at Ranchi on 14th April 1940. The proceedings of the conference commenced with the singing of the *Vande matram* song. In his presidential speech Shyama Prasad Mukherji said that, "Problem in our province arises in connection with the future of 'Adivasis' which must be solved in a spirit of full justice and sympathy." From the same platform the Maharaja of Panchkot, Kalyani Prasad Singh Dev addressed the conference and said that the Hindu Sabha would try its level best to keep the aboriginals in the Hindu fold. "*Hindu mara nahi hai. Iska chetra sankirn nahi hai, jo koi jis kisi Bhartiye dharm me vishwas rakhta hai, wahi Hindu hai. Wo hi hamare apne hain. Chotanagpur ke Adivasi humare hi jaise Hindu hain. Hum apne dosh se unhe alag nahi hone denge. Ab humari aankhen khul chuki hain.*"³⁹ (The Hindu man has not died. His range is not parochial. Whosoever believes in whatsoever faith in this land, is a Hindu. They are all ours. The aboriginals of Chotanagpur are Hindus like us. We will not let them be separated from us because of our own faults. Our eyes have opened, and we are awakened now.)⁴⁰ Golwalkar expressed almost the same view time to time from different platforms. Golwalkar proposed that for the integration of tribals, one and the same formula applies: "They can be given *Yajnopavita* (the sacred thread given during Vedic initiation). They should be given equal rights and footings in the matter of religious rights, in temple worship, in the study of Vedas, and in general, in all our social and religious affairs. This is the only right

solution for all the problems of casteism found nowadays in our Hindu society".⁴¹ The ghost of Christianity over the minds of both the leaders (Kalyani Prasad Singh Dev and M.S. Golwalkar) is very much obvious. Just to prevent the conversion of tribals into Christianity, they were ready to give social status to tribals within Hindu fold. They were assuming that all the indigenous people are basically Hindu and they should be within the Hindu religious system. Their writing depict the miserable plight of the tribals were not the cause of worry, but what really worried them was the conversion of tribals into Christianity. Perhaps their line of thought was that owing to the hierarchy in Hindu religious system where the tribals had virtually no position, they are being attracted to Christianity. This necessitated these offers of equal status, which they thought would be a carrot for the socially inferior tribals who had been so for ages. Devendranath Tagore, Brahma Samaj leader also tried to awaken the Hindu society through social reforms and welfare measures in order to avoid the 'danger of the invasion of Christianity.' He discussed with his friends the ways and means of protecting Hindus and their tradition, and started a school for 'Hindu welfare'. He encouraged the Hindus to take initiative in social reform and participate in public activities.⁴² So, we see that the motive behind the social reforms was not really guided by the philanthropic intension and for uplifting the low caste Hindus and tribals, but that it was the 'danger of Christianity' which compelled them to do so.

In the Ninth Bihar Provincial Hindu Conference, Swami Satyanand moved the following resolution:

"This conference declares that the Hindu sanghatan and the Sudhi movement is a vital necessity for the strengthening and consolidating of the Hindus in Bihar".

While explaining the meaning of the resolution he stated that,

"A religion which did not perform Suddhi was bound to die sooner or later. Let all the Hindus of whatever part they might be considered as brethren. It was their negligence that so many aboriginal Hindus had been converted into Christianity. If they would go to the Assam and the interior of Ranchi districts they would see that these places appeared to have belonged to Christian religion. Attempts should be made to reconvert all those who have so far been converted to Christian religion".⁴³

After that Thebla Oraon then moved the following resolution:

1. This conference condemns the practice prevailing in Christian Missionaries schools of compelling non-

³⁶ A Path of Caste Hindu Deplored, *Indian Nation News Paper*, Ranchi, 8-7-1935.

³⁷ Ajit Kumar Chakrabarti, Maharishi Debendranath Tagore, cited in Sumit Sarkar, (2002) 228

³⁸ Mathew, C.V. (1999) 55.

³⁹ Patna State Archives, Ninth Bihar Provincial Conference Report, Ranchi, 14th April 1940.

⁴⁰ This is my translation which captures the essence of the speech.

⁴¹ M.S. Golwalkar: Bunch of Thoughts, cited in Koenraad Elst (2002) *Who is Hindu?* (Delhi) 205.

⁴² Sundarajan, K.R. S.S. Raghavachar, (1969) *Hinduism* (Patiala) 90

Christian students to receive Christian religious instructions and draws the attention of the Government and district board to take step to stop compulsion and to refuse and withdraw the grants from such schools as do not comply with their directions in this behalf.

2. This conference records its satisfaction at the awakening that had taken place among the Hindu Adibasi who forms the bulk of the aboriginal population of Chotanagpur and Santhal parganas offers its warm congratulation to the workers devoted to this noble cause".⁴⁴

Sjt. Hareshwar Datta, Secretary, District Hindu Sabha, Chapra moved a resolution stating that "this conference resolves that the non-Christian aborigines, Adibasis be recorded under head 'Hindu', in the next census."⁴⁵If we look at some of the earlier sources we will see that this particular demand was not new. Mr. Hallett mentioned this nine years before the conference.

A fortnightly confidential report from Commissioner's Office, Ranchi to Mr. Hallett informs, "Vigorous propaganda at the back of which is the Hindu Mission, Calcutta, is going on to induce the aboriginals to record themselves as Hindu during the census"⁴⁶

Thus, it is obvious that the chief thrust of the movement was not 'Hinduisation' through propagation of Hindu ideals and beliefs among the tribals, hence bringing about a qualitative change in their lives and more importantly their identity but, 'Hinduisation' by keeping them away from Christianity. In fact, they explicitly declared that all unconverted Christians were actually Hindus. As far as the Christian tribals were concerned, the focus was to be on the Shuddhi ceremony, again a mere perfunctory ritual that again would not have caused any real change in their identity or perception about life. In fact the growing emphasis on recording all non converted tribals as Hindus, clearly shows that the motives of the Hindu organisations was not so much concerned about the way of life and perceptions of the tribals or their self perception of their identity as much as it was concerned with officially recording them as Hindus and not Christians. Hence, it can be concluded that, the fact that these organisations in spite of their organised efforts, had limited impact on the identity of the tribals and had more to do with their own limited motives. In the 1950's, promotion of highly sanskritised Hindi and cow-protection to fight against Christian missions was made into an early plank of Jan Sangh activity as Hindutva forces sought to regain the

ground lost after the murder of Gandhi.⁴⁷Till the recent anti-Christian campaign, the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad) may have been associated in the public mind primarily with Ramjanmbhumi and the onslaught on Muslims, culminating in the destruction of the Babri Masjid. But at the time of its foundation, its main thrust had been directed primarily against Christian proselytization in the tribal areas especially in Chotanagpur and Madhya Pradesh.⁴⁸

According to Andre Beteille, "in today's India, tribes which answered to the anthropologist's conception of the ideal type are rarely to be found."⁴⁹The process of inclusion embraced the life of tribal population. As such, it allowed for the inclusion of India's inhabitants, whatever their form of worship, however monotheistic or polytheistic. At the least, this action included as "Hindu" those who fell outside the pale of purity, hundreds of millions who could never be allowed to defile or pollute the sanctity of proper dwelling places. These fiats became devices for incorporating all tribal population.⁵⁰This Hinduism is not only proselytizing in its aims but chauvinistic, exclusivist, fundamental and even imperialistic, in its demands. It aims, in its most extreme form, to represent all the native people of India.⁵¹"In Gramsci's terms the class, which wishes to become hegemonic, has to nationalize itself and the new 'nationalist' Hinduism comes from the middle class."⁵²The motive of the Hindu missionary activities seems to have been the urgency to quell the wave of tribal conversion to Christianity rather than any genuine ideal to better their lives and bring a qualitative change through Hinduism. However, the evidence of primary sources shows that in their methods they were quite organised and united, contrary to the views of most scholars. Their primary concern however was 'Hinduisation' through the formulation of the Shuddhi ceremony and later the mere recording of tribals as Hindus in the census. Hence, the impact of these two processes of Hinduisation also seems to have been concomitant with their motives. The most important impact that the Hindu missionary organisations seem to have had on the tribal identity was perhaps their inclusion in the census as Hindus on a limited scale before 1947. After 1947, however, their demands seem to have been fulfilled in the recording of the non Christian tribals as Hindus.

⁴³ Patna State Archives, Ninth Bihar Provincial Conference Report, Ranchi, 15th April 1940.

⁴⁴ Patna State Archives, Ninth Bihar Provincial Conference Report, Ranchi, 15th April 1940

⁴⁵ Ibid, 3

⁴⁶ Patna State Archives, Home Department, Political Branch, File No. K.W.20, 12th January 1931, 3

⁴⁷ Sarkar, Sumit (2002) 238.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 239.

⁴⁹ Beteille, Andre (1977) "The definition in India, of Tribe" in Romesh Thapar, (ed) *Tribe, Caste and Religion*, (Delhi)14

⁵⁰ Frykenberg, R.E. (2009) 17

⁵¹ Ibid, 25

⁵² Thapar, Romila (1998) 28