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INTRODUCTION
Conversion and the Shifting Discourse of Violence

Introduction and the argument

This book is about the politics of Pentecostal conversion and anti-Christian violence in India. According to Lata Mani (2009: 125), violence refers to 'any diminishment or violation of isness. Isness is the quality of beingness that is intrinsic to all that is alive'. For Mani, 'isness embraces form as well as essence, surface as well as depth, matter as well as spirit. All living things whether deemed animate like humans and animals, or regarded as inanimate like stones or rocks, manifest their own specific isness'. Mani further notes that 'violence whether upon oneself or another signals the dishonouring of isness'. For her, 'violence can be physical, mental, emotional or some combination of all three. Depending on context, both action and inaction can be forms of violence' (Mani, 2009: 125). Although Mani's definition of violence is very significant, it is articulated at a philosophical level; it is broad in scope and can describe practically anything as violence. Furthermore, the concepts of 'isness' and 'beingness' are very abstract.

In this book, the concept of violence is used in two senses: physical violence and intersubjective violence (Howes, 2008: 3). Physical violence is 'violence associated with our physical capacities and limitations', expressed primarily through physical attacks, riots, beating, killing,

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murder, rape, torture, brutality, prosecution, force, aggression, cruelty, and so on. Such violence is 'understood as a means for changing the nature of our social relations, but its distinctive quality lies in its close association with the manipulation and destruction of the body' (Howes, 2008: 3). Intersubjective violence refers to 'violence associated with profound fissures in our expectations as to how we ought to interact with one another'. Particularly, 'this intersubjective violence can consist of a word, a gesture or a look either between individuals or as supported by institutions. Such violence can inspire fear, strike at the core of one's identity, or make a way of living and being impossible even without physical intimidation or destruction' (Howes, 2008: 3).[1]

Much of the literature on violence in India has been about religious/ethnic violence, referred to as 'communalism'[2] (Kaur, 2005; Rehman, 2016; Tambiah, 1996). Although India witnessed large-scale anti-Sikh violence in the 1980s (V. Das, 1990 and 2007; Gupta, 2007; Juergensmeyer, 1988; van Dyke, 1996), Hindu-Muslim violence has been, as Varshney (2002) rightly argues, the 'master narrative' of Indian politics in the postcolonial period. The secular-democratic principles that guided inter-community relations have been scarred over the years by 'recurrent instances of collective violence' (Ghassem-Fachandi, 2012: 1), such as Jabalpur (1961), Ranchi (1967), Ahmedabad (1969), Meerut (1987), Bhagalpur (1989), Mumbai (1992–93), Gujarat (2002) and Muzaffarnagar (2013). Scholars of history, political science and sociology like Hassan (1980), Pandey (2006), Bayly (1985), van der Veer (1994), Brass (2003), Wilkinson (2004), Blom Hansen (1999), Gupta (2011), Jaffrelot (2010) and several others have meticulously documented and explained the Hindu–Muslim conflict in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial India.

'While Hindu-*Muslim* violence has been extensively analysed, Hindu-*Christian* violence was until recently so rare that scholars have seldom investigated the phenomenon' (Bauman and Leech, 2012: 2195). A survey of the recent literature shows that almost nothing has been written about Hindu–Christian conflict in contemporary India. There could be several reasons for this: (1) compared to Hindu–Muslim violence, the Hindu–

Christian conflict is very recent in India; (2) the percentage of Christians in the Indian population is very low and the Christian community, except in some states, is politically insignificant; hence employing what Brass (2003) calls 'institutionalised riot system'[3] is non-beneficial from the perspective of electoral politics; and (3) Hindu–Christian violence has been largely small-scale and dispersed.

However, since the late 1980s, there has been a shift in the political discourse in India following the growing political dominance of Hindu nationalist political groups. With the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) coming into power in the 1990s, the family of various Hindu nationalist organisations, collectively referred to as the Sangh Parivar, has felt politically and economically empowered to advance the Hindu nationalist agenda. The question is what made the Sangh Parivar shift its attention away from the Muslims and direct it towards the Christians? John Zavos (2001: 75) argues that the Sangh Parivar felt increasingly threatened by the intensification of Christian missionary activity in the decade prior to the turning of the millennium. It considered Christian missionaries and their proselytisation a threat to the unity and integrity of the (Hindu) nation. In particular, the AD 2000 and Beyond Movement[4] and the Joshua Project,[5] which claimed that India is 'the number one target' and 'on top of "God's Agenda",' provided evidence of the intensification of missionary activity (Zavos, 2001: 75).

Furthermore, the Pope, during a visit to India in November 1999, declared during the Papal High Mass that just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted in the soil of Europe and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, we can pray that in the Third Christian Millennium *a great harvest of faith* will be reaped in this vast and vital continent (Kim, 2005: 227; Melanchthon, 2002: 106). He further 'reminded the bishops of Asia that evangelism was their "absolute priority" because "Christ is the one Mediator between God and man and the sole Redeemer of the world"' (Kim, 2005: 227). Hindu nationalists viewed this declaration as a deliberate attempt by the Christian leadership to actively convert Hindus to Christianity in order to 'revive Christendom for re-establishing Western supremacy' (Shortt, 2012: 156). In addition,

several other factors such as the Christian origin of Sonia Gandhi who became President of the Congress Party in 1998, the Dalit Christian campaign for Scheduled Caste status and various policies of globalisation contributed to 'Christianophobia' (Shortt, 2012) and consequently led to the intensification of persecution of Christians in different parts of India (Bauman, 2013; Copley, 1997; Frykenberg, 2004; Sengupta, 2015; Zavos, 2001).

The late 1990s for the first time witnessed a series of large scale attacks on Christian missionaries and converts. One of the major incidents of anti-Christian violence occurred in the tribal district of Dangs in Gujarat during December–January 1998–99. A few days before Christmas in 1998, people in Dangs received handbills with messages such as 'Hindus wake up, Christians run away' (Melanchthon, 2002: 103). Other bills carried the message: 'There is time even now. Realise! Realise! Purify yourself through Yagna and become a Hindu. Otherwise you will regret later. One who does not understand is a fool. May God grant wisdom to such innocent Adivasis' (Melanchthon, 2002: 112). Following this, violence erupted on Christmas day that lasted for more than ten days. Thirty-six churches and prayer halls were burned or destroyed, and scores of individuals were assaulted and their property looted (Zavos, 2001: 74). Similarly, in January 1999, the Australian pastor Graham Staines, who worked with leprosy patients in the tribal regions, was brutally murdered along with his two sons while he attended an annual gathering of Christians in Manoharpur village on the border of tribal-dominated Mayurbhanj and Keonjhar districts of Odisha. John Zavos (2001: 74) notes that while in 1997 most attacks against Christians were centred particularly on the north-eastern states as large number of Christians lived in that region, from 1998 onwards attention shifted to north Indian states, especially Odisha, Bihar and Gujarat. Zavos further notes that a fairly large body of evidence showed that various organisations of the Sangh Parivar, particularly the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), the Bajrang Dal and the Hindu Jagaran Manch, were linked to these attacks.

A recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2014: 21–23) points out that by the end of 2012 Christians experienced

harassment in the largest number of countries (110) (Fox, 2015). While governments harassed Christians in 81 countries, individuals and groups (referred to as 'social harassment') harassed them in 83 countries. In India, the study shows that 'very high social hostilities' (with a score of 7.2 or higher on the 10-point index) were experienced involving religion. For example, in 2011 India was placed second (after Pakistan) in the study's Social Hostility Index, and in 2012 it occupied the third place after Pakistan and Afghanistan (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2014: 15). The study further pointed out that religious freedom in India has constantly declined and successive governments have put higher restrictions on the functioning of religion. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) also raised concerns about the declining religious freedom and increasing violence against religious minorities in India in its 2016 annual report. The report pointed out that 'in 2015, religious tolerance deteriorated and religious freedom violations increased in India. Minority communities, especially Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs, experienced numerous incidents of intimidation, harassment, and violence, largely at the hands of Hindu nationalist groups' (USCIRF, 2016: 159). It further pointed out that 'members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party tacitly supported these [Hindu nationalist] groups and used religiously-divisive language to further inflame tension' (USCIRF, 2016: 159).

The available data show that from 1964 to 1996, only 38 incidents of violence against Christians were registered in the country. However, in 1997 alone, 24 incidents were noted by the United Christian Forum for Human Rights, and by 1998, the number had gone up to 90, though some Christian spokespersons claimed that the true figure is several times higher (Lal, 2006). Data from the All India Christian Council suggests that each year from 2001 to 2005, about 200 anti-Christian attacks were reported in India. Bauman and Leech (2012: 2195) also note that 'in the last decade, [however,] violence between Hindu and Christian groups in India has increased substantially. Christians are now attacked, on average, 200 times a year, although the scope and severity of those attacks varies widely'. The most recent data shows that 'there

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were at least 365 major attacks on Christians and their institutions during 2015, compared to 120 in 2014; these incidents affected more than 8,000 Christians' (USCIRF, 2016: 161). Such violence against Christians is often considered a response to religious conversion and the rapid rise of Christianity among marginalised groups, particularly Dalits[6] and adivasis[7] (Frykenberg, 2004; Hinnells and King, 2007: 1). Data suggest that Dalit and adivasi converts constitute 50 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively, of all Christians in India (Clementin-Ojha, 2012: 611; Roberts, 2016: 111; Robinson, 2003: 29). Given this, the central secretary of the RSS claimed that violence against Christians was a result of the 'anger of patriotic youth against anti-national forces… the direct result of conversion of Hindus to Christianity by Christian priests' (Melanchthon, 2002: 104).

Compared to mainline Catholic and Protestant churches, the Pentecostals have actively pursued the conversion project that has not only attracted the attention of Hindu nationalists but also tainted the image of other Christian groups in India (Bauman, 2015). As a consequence, mainline churches have distanced themselves from the Pentecostals and accused them of *not* being 'genuinely' interested in the development of marginalised communities but *only* in their conversion. The mainline churches argue that Pentecostals are 'a new breed of missionary' whose main mission is to 'convert as many Indians to Christianity as possible' and 'reach the unreached at any cost' (Baldauf, 2005). Moreover, they have alleged that Pentecostals are responsible for the increasing attacks against Christian communities in India. A Roman Catholic Bishop in Jhabua district of Madhya Pradesh pointed out to Baldauf (2005) that 'they [the Pentecostals] are irresponsible. Consequences don't matter to them. They put the fire and then they leave it to burn'. Given such differences, diversities and contradictions among Christian groups in India, this book urges readers to *not* treat Christianity as a homogeneous category, but as an inherently pluralistic field. As Bauman and Young (2014: ix–x) have rightly noted, given the existing 'intra-Christian differences' or Christianity's 'pluriformity' in India, it is essential to speak of 'Christianities' in the plural instead

of 'Christianity' in the singular (Haynes, 2014).[8] Following this, the book focuses specifically on the 'Pentecostal' variety of Christianity. It is instructive to note here that Pentecostalism itself is very diverse and includes classical Pentecostals, charismatics and neo-Pentecostals. In this book, the word 'Pentecostal' refers to the indigenous churches or neo-Pentecostals who are working among the tribal groups in south Rajasthan.

Given this, the questions that this book asks are: Why has India been experiencing increasing incidents of anti-Christian violence since the 1990s? Why are the adivasis increasingly converting to Pentecostal Christianity? And, what are the implications of religious conversion for religion within indigenous communities on the one hand and broader issues of secularism, religious freedom and democratic rights on the other? Drawing on anthropological/ethnographic fieldwork amongst the Bhils of southern Rajasthan since 2005 and most specifically from 2011, this book asserts that ideological incompatibility and antagonism between Christian missionaries and Hindu nationalists provide only a partial explanation for anti-Christian violence in India. Providing a holistic interpretation, it argues that the competing projects of conversion of both Christian missionaries and Hindu nationalists, the politicisation of identity in relation to competitive electoral politics, and the dynamics of the (BJP-led) development state are integrally related to the production of anti-Christian violence in India. Specifically, this book unravels the complex interactions between different actors/agents in the production of anti-Christian violence and provides detailed ethnographic narratives on Pentecostal conversion, Hindu nationalist politics and anti-Christian violence in the state of Rajasthan that has hitherto been dominated by upper caste Rajput Hindu(tva) ideology.

Debates on religious conversion

The postcolonial Indian nation adopted secularism as the official ideology of the state for managing politics and religious diversities. Unlike the Anglo-American usage of secularism that underlined separation of church

and state or the religious and the political domain, Indian secularism has been based on principles of equal treatment of all religions (*sarva dharma sama bhava*) and religious neutrality (*dharma nirapekshata*). Rajeev Bhargava (2011: 105) has conceptualised the relationship between state and religion in India as 'principled distance' which refers to 'a flexible approach both to questions of public inclusion or exclusion of religion and to the extent to which the state engages with it or disengages from it'. The ideology of secularism and constitutional principles have provided all citizens the right to freedom of religion and conscience (Chatterjee, 2011: 242; Maclure and Taylor, 2011; Mahmood and Danchin, 2014; Sharma, 2011).[9] However, while Christian missionaries have followed the constitutional framework to justify conversion, the followers of the Sangh Parivar have used the same principles to oppose conversion. Specifically, conversion to Christianity remains a highly complex and controversial issue, which has generated the following sets of theoretical debates: (1) caste identity versus equality; (2) free will versus force and inducement; and (3) the question of continuity and rupture.

Beginning with colonialism, Christian missionaries have criticised the hierarchical Hindu caste system and the inherent discriminations against the low caste and tribal populations (Ballhatchet, 1998; Copley, 1997; Frykenberg, 2005). Through conversion, the missionaries promised to free these communities from caste exploitation and make them equal, educated and dignified members of society (Lankina and Getachew, 2012b; Mosse, 2012). Conversion thus acted as a form of protest against the hegemonic caste system and provided freedom and opportunity to low-caste and tribal communities (Heredia, 2011; Shah and Shah, 2013: 211). Over the years it is however observed that instead of eradicating caste, Christianity has incorporated/accommodated caste into its social structure, which continues to persist and govern the life world of Indian Christians (Clementin-Ojha, 2012; Collins, 2007; Fuller, 1976; Mosse, 2012; Shah and Shah, 2013).

The Hindu nationalists have nullified the liberating potential of Christian conversion because it has failed to eradicate caste. In addition, members of the Sangh Parivar have criticised conversion on the following

grounds: (1) although Christians criticise the caste system, they use the very same caste identity to claim benefits from the state, particularly through the reservation system; and (2) missionaries use various incentives to convert people to Christianity. Specifically, the latter raises questions about freedom of religion and the constitutional measures. The question is whether Dalits and adivasis are converting to Christianity out of free will and internal spiritual transformation or they are duped through inducements, incentives, fraudulent measures and force (Viswanath, 2013: 120). Similarly, the question is whether freedom to propagate includes the freedom to convert. This also has raised questions about 'personhood and agency' (Vitebsky, 2008: 257) and freedom of conscience of Dalits and adivasis. While the missionaries argue that conversion is the result of a rational and deliberate decision on the part of Dalits and adivasis, the Hindu nationalists have argued that the poverty and marginality of these communities have made them more susceptible to Christian missionary conspiracies. Conversion is considered anti-national and is seen as a project of Western imperialism; converts to Christianity are thus viewed with suspicion and their citizenship and loyalty to the nation are often questioned.

Although religious conversion is grounded on the idea of 'discontinuity' (Engelke, 2004; Robbins, 2003, 2004) or 'making a complete break with the past' (Daswani, 2013; Maxwell, 1998; Meyer, 1998) beliefs, practices and rituals, 'the persistence of past' (Keane, 2007: 115), particularly caste identity among the converts, shows the continuity of culture. Indian Christians (including Pentecostals) have accepted the 'continuity' theory because it is intimately linked to state benefits and governmentality, specifically to access reservation, employment and other welfare benefits (Appadurai, 1993). This has created a large number of 'secret disciples' (Oddie, 1977: 4) or undocumented, Crypto-Christians[10] (Kent, 2011: 676; Robbins, 2011), which has also raised questions about what conversion means to adivasis and the various ways of being 'Christian moderns' (Keane, 2007). While in some cases the newly converted adivasis have 'forgotten' or *terminated the relationship altogether* (Vitebsky, 2008: 255) with their past, in other cases the converts have 'oscillated' (Sahay, 1968:

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928) between their new and old identities. As a consequence, the two religions are being radically reshaped and synthesised to create a hybrid belief system (Bayly, 2004: 1).

Methodology and a note on fieldwork

What is religious conversion? Why and how do people convert? And, what are the implications of conversion for the larger processes of social and cultural transformation in the (tribal) community? In order to answer these questions, a detailed ethnographic and phenomenological approach is employed, which heavily draws on the 'fieldwork' tradition in anthropology and sociology (Miller and Yamamori, 2007: 3; Ram, 2013: 5).[11] The practice of fieldwork or ethnography is at the core of what anthropologists have called anthropology's fundamental 'methodological values' – 'the taken-for-granted, pretheoretical notions of what it is to do anthropology (and to be an anthropologist)' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 1). This approach was followed primarily because it allowed me to observe and understand the subjective experiences of people collectively in a community setting through long-term field research, particularly through continual interaction and participation in community life.

The objective of the book is to understand conversion and the growth of Pentecostal Christianity among the Bhils of south Rajasthan.[12] In this book, as an anthropologist/sociologist of religion,[13] I am neither interested in the theological aspects of Pentecostalism nor in the question of 'truth', particularly in questions like whether or not miracles happen, or whether or not the Holy Spirit truly manifests itself in the life of a person (Pollak-Eltz, 1978: 461; van der Geest, 2011). Religion is above all a matter of faith and belief and it is not my intent to question the foundation of someone's belief. Instead, I am more interested in understanding the 'life-world' of the 'believers' (*biswasi*/converts) – their everyday subjective experiences and 'ordinary theology'[14] on why they believe in what they believe in. In doing so, I observe their life-world not from a distance, but by transforming myself, as a participant observer, into one of them, even when I am not (this is particularly important in