

## Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India

Drawing on in-depth ethnographic fieldwork amongst the Bhils of southern Rajasthan, this book unravels the complex interactions between different actors, interest groups and institutions, and provides detailed ethnographic narratives on Pentecostal conversion, Hindu nationalist politics and anti-Christian violence in the largest state of India that has hitherto been dominated by upper-caste Rajput Hindu ideology.

Why has India been experiencing increasing incidents of anti-Christian violence since the 1990s? Why are the Bhil adivasis increasingly converting to Pentecostalism? And, what are the implications of religious conversion within indigenous communities on the one hand and on broader issues of secularism, religious freedom and democratic rights on the other? The book seeks to answer these questions.

It studies that conversion and anti-Christian violence in India is complex and multifaceted and is contingent upon socio-historical contexts. Mere ideological incompatibility between Christian missionaries and Hindu nationalists provides only a partial explanation for anti-Christian violence. Building a holistic interpretation, the book argues, it is imperative that we understand the diversities and contradictions within Indian Christianity as well as explicate the complex cultural identities of tribals, the politicisation of these identities in relation to competitive electoral politics, and the dynamics of the 'development state'.

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# Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India

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## CONTENTS

|  |             |
|--|-------------|
| <i>Foreword</i>  | <i>vii</i>  |
| <i>Preface</i>   | <i>xi</i>   |
| <i>Abbreviations</i>   | <i>xvii</i> |
| 1. Introduction: Conversion and the Shifting<br>Discourse of Violence  | 1           |
| 2. Spreading Like Fire: The Growth of Pentecostalism<br>among Tribals  | 21          |
| 3. Taking Refuge in Christ: Four Narratives on<br>Religious Conversion | 49          |
| 4. Becoming Believers: Adivasi Women and the<br>Pentecostal Church     | 87          |
| 5. Seen as the Alien: Hindutva Politics and<br>Anti-Christian Violence | 120         |
| 6. Conclusion: Beyond the Competing<br>Projects of Conversion          | 158         |
| <i>Endnotes</i>  | 165         |
| <i>Bibliography</i>  | 179         |
| <i>Index</i>   | 201         |

## FOREWORD

The global rise of Pentecostal Christianity is one of the most remarkable phenomena of rapid social and cultural change in the past few decades. For a considerable time, it remained almost unnoticed in the field of social sciences. It had certainly not been predicted by any current theory. In that sense it came as a surprise, shattering the basic assumptions of these disciplines and a widespread self-understanding. The great British sociologist of religion, David Martin, has compared this growth of a religious movement with epochal events like the fall of communism in Europe and the cultural transformations in the West during the 1960s – all developments of great consequence, but unforeseen by observers at the time.

Martin is himself one of the pioneers of research on Pentecostalism. His study of 1990 on ‘the explosion of Protestantism in Latin America’, published under the appropriately ‘Pentecostal’ title *Tongues of Fire*, represents the first authoritative study in this area. It is not a coincidence that it was written by the same scholar who had developed the most penetrating early critique of the secularisation thesis according to which modernisation in the sense of economic growth and scientific-technological progress more or less automatically and irreversibly leads to religious decline. For him and those agreeing with his critical work and his attempts to develop a general theory of secularisation, the new phenomena became one of the cornerstones of an alternative approach to the understanding of religious change.

## FOREWORD

While this book by Martin was restricted to one geographical area, namely, Latin America, it was followed in 2002 by another study (*Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish*) that widened the focus and included Africa and Asia. Despite this broader horizon, India, one of the largest states of the world, remained rather marginal. Less than one page was devoted to the subcontinent. There were certainly some good reasons for this relative lack of attention at that point in time.

The present book is not the first, but is a particularly helpful empirical contribution to fill that obvious gap. The intellectual background of its author is not in the sociology of religion, but in political sociology. His original research interest was not to study Christianity in India, but during his (earlier) research on the changing relationships between state and civil society in a tribal-dominated district in the state of Rajasthan during an era of liberalisation, he realised that he could not fully understand what was going on without paying attention to the 'complex and dynamic relationship between Hindu nationalists, Christian missionaries and tribal converts' (vi). One of the great strengths of this book follows from this background of its author. He does not derive a low or high affinity to violence, for example, from the core theological doctrines of a religious tradition, be it Christianity or Hinduism, but attempts to provide a *holistic* interpretation. That fits the program of a political sociology of religion as one might call David Martin's approach or the Weberian approach in general if the latter is not identified with Weber's speculative claims on long-term trends of disenchantment and rationalisation. 'Political' here means that the analysis has to focus on the political dimension in the competing projects of Christian missionaries and the Hindu nationalists opposing them. It has to take into account the role of religious orientations in electoral politics and the role of political leadership in an India no longer dominated by the specific forms of secularity institutionalised when independence was gained.

Such a 'political' view does not have to be reductionist in the sense of treating religious orientations as a mere disguise or distorted form of the truly motivating material impulses. It fits this approach that 'conversion'

## FOREWORD

is not simply understood as a substitution of one meaning-system by another, but – following Robert Hefner – as ‘an adjustment in self-identification through the at least nominal acceptance of religious actions or beliefs deemed more fitting, useful, or true.’ The explanation for the growing number of incidents of anti-Christian violence is accordingly circumspect; the author emphasises the political economy of tribal society and the more general recent political changes in Rajasthan in particular or in India in general.

For readers outside India or non-experts on India, this book is a rich source of information on the long-term and recent history of Christianity in the subcontinent. Readers already familiar with the general situation will nevertheless also profit enormously from studying this book because of the great sensitivity with which the author has collected and interpreted narrations of conversion and of the experiences following upon it. Conversion to Christianity remains a personal risk both within tribal society and with regard to politically-dominant forces. This leads to a considerable number of secret disciples or undocumented Crypto-Christians. It is depressing to see that the caste system does not necessarily lose its strength even among Christians when high-caste Christians continue to discriminate against their low-caste fellow Christians.

The long chapters on Adivasi women and the often deeply moving stories of their experience (Chapter 4) and on the dynamics of anti-Christian violence (Chapter 5) are further highlights of this impressive study. The author also does his best not to treat Pentecostalism as a homogeneous unity. He is aware of the variety of Pentecostals and the inner diversity of Christianity in general. When he reports the skepticism on the side of Catholics and traditional Protestants with regard to the conversion activities of the Pentecostals or when he quotes the polemics of Pentecostals directed against the Catholic cult of saints, he cannot avoid getting into another field of tensions that is relevant to his subject. One might even have hoped for more attention paid to these tensions among Christians.

## FOREWORD

A last point: The author of this book does not fall into the trap of what one might call a vulgar Weberianism. Although it is true that forms of inner-worldly asceticism do indeed contribute to individual economic success, it would be misleading to abstract this specific causal connection from a much more complex picture of the origins of collective economic success and progress. In the 'holistic' and 'political' attempt we have at hand here, such an easy step is not being taken. The author does not turn the one-sidedness of a materialist reductionism into a cultural determinism. In that sense, this study that deals with a topic some might consider marginal, is exemplary in its achievements.

**Hans Joas**

Ernst Troeltsch Professor for the Sociology of Religion, Humboldt  
University of Berlin and Professor of Sociology, The University of Chicago



## PREFACE

Unknowingly, the roots of this book go back to 2006–07 when I first arrived in Udaipur for my PhD fieldwork on an altogether different topic. I was then interested in understanding the changing relationships between state and civil society in an era of political and economic liberalisation, and little did I know then of my interest in religion, and that too Christianity. For my PhD research, I studied three ideologically and politically different non-government organisations (NGOs) in the tribal-dominated Udaipur district and discussed their interface with the donor agencies, market forces, state, political society and populations. One of these NGOs was the Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad (RVKP – Rajasthan Tribal Welfare Association), an affiliate of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).

During my ethnographic research (a total of eight months stay in tribal villages of Jhadol and Kotra *tehsils*), I became more interested in RVKP's ideology and its strategy of development. While the claimed objective of the RVKP was welfare and development of the tribal communities, its latent objective was to act as a counterforce to Christian missionaries and Muslims of the region. In fact, I came to understand that the existence of these two communities, categorised as 'the other', is what justified the presence of the RVKP in the region. Therefore, I became specifically interested in understanding the RVKP's relationship with a diverse group of indigenous missionary organisations and 'tribal Christians' (those who

## PREFACE

had converted to Christianity). From my interaction with missionaries and a brief scanning of local newspapers, it appeared that there had been increasing incidents of violence against Christian missionaries and tribal converts. Such violence included ‘any form of physical assault or coercion (e.g., murder, kidnapping, rape, beatings), and/or any act that could intentionally or inadvertently harm an individual or group (e.g., throwing rocks through windows, arson, etc.)’ (Bauman, 2015: 17).

In addition, what made me realise the gravity of this issue and inspired me to study it was the 2006 anti-Christian violence in the tribal-dominated Kandhmal district of Odisha. Until 2006, anti-Christian violence had been small-scale and dispersed; the Kandhmal violence, for the first time, placed it at the centre of national political attention. The perpetrators of the violence cited religious conversion by missionaries as a major reason behind the rise of such violence. Given this, in 2011, I returned to the tribal villages where I had worked earlier with the objective of understanding the complex and dynamic relationship between Hindu nationalists, Christian missionaries and tribal converts. My return to Rajasthan was supported by my home institute, the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Delhi. I would like to thank the Planning Unit and the Industrial Research and Development Unit of IIT Delhi for providing financial support to my projects titled ‘Poverty, Religious Violence and the “Developmental” State in India’ (MI00935) and ‘Understanding Anti-Christian Violence in India’ (MI00940). I am also grateful to IIT Delhi for providing me with the QIP Book-writing grant (2016/CDC-BW/02) that supported the copy-editing work of the manuscript.

A major part of the writing for this book was undertaken during a postdoctoral fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation of Germany. During the fellowship (2011–13), I was based at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies (University of Erfurt, Germany), which provided a fitting intellectual atmosphere to write the chapters. I would like to thank Professor Hans Joas, who was the Director of the Max Weber Centre, for finding my project useful and agreeing to be my supervisor. However, when I was about to join the Max Weber Centre,

## PREFACE

Professor Joas unfortunately left Erfurt and joined the Freiburg Institute of Advanced Studies. Despite this, I remained in touch with him and he continued to guide me. I am particularly grateful to Professor Joas for his support and guidance during the fellowship and afterwards.

With Professor Joas' leaving, Professor Martin Fuchs became my supervisor at the Max Weber Centre. He was the one who quizzed my naive ideas and pushed my limits. He made me think harder and forced me to go beyond my comfort zone. I must acknowledge here that without him, it would not have been possible to start this book. In addition, colloquiums at the Max Weber Centre and conversations with Antje Linkenbach-Fuchs, Vera Hoeke and Cornelia Haas were very useful. I am also grateful to the Humanities and Social Sciences Department at IIT Delhi and Professor Surendra Prasad, who was the Director of IIT Delhi, for granting me leave and to the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation for providing the fellowship. Further, I would like to thank Professor Helene Basu for inviting me to spend the summer semester of 2015 at the Institute of Ethnology, University of Muenster, Germany, where I wrote part of the book. I am also grateful to the Charles Wallace India Trust and Queen's University Belfast, especially Dr Maruska Svasek, Dr Evropi Chatzipanagiotidou, and Richard Alford, for giving the Charles Wallace Fellowship for 2017, which provided the much needed time and opportunity to finish the last round of revisions and editing of this book. I am indebted to Vedi R. Hadiz, my PhD supervisor, for his constant encouragement and support and for pushing me to complete this manuscript.

I have presented parts of this book at places such as the University of Erfurt, IIT Delhi, National University of Singapore, Ludwig Maximilian University (Munich), Tata Institute of Social Sciences (Tuljapur), Jawaharlal Nehru University (New Delhi), IIT Kanpur, University of Muenster, Humboldt University (Berlin), University of Luzern (Switzerland), Leipzig University, University of Newcastle (Australia), University of Warsaw, University of Antwerp, IIT Roorkee and University of Groningen. I am grateful to Abdul Shaban, Helene

## PREFACE

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## PREFACE

A smaller version of Chapter 5 appeared as ‘Religious Violence and the “Developmental State” in Rajasthan’, in R. C. Tripathi and P. Singh’s edited volume titled *Perspectives on Violence and Othering in India* published by Springer (New Delhi). I am grateful to Springer publications for permission to publish a larger, modified version of the chapter in this book.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

|      |                                       |
|------|---------------------------------------|
| BJP  | Bharatiya Janata Party                |
| CCFM | Calvary Covenant Fellowship Mission   |
| CWIF | Charles Wallace India Foundation      |
| DM   | District Magistrate                   |
| EMI  | Emmanuel Mission International        |
| FBC  | Filadelfia Bible College              |
| FCRA | Foreign Contribution Regulation Act   |
| FFCI | Filadelfia Fellowship Church of India |
| GDP  | Gross Domestic Product                |
| IIT  | Indian Institute of Technology        |
| IPC  | Indian Pentecostal Church             |
| MA   | Master of Arts                        |
| NGO  | Non-Government Organisation           |
| NJC  | New Jerusalem Church                  |
| NMM  | Native Missionary Movement            |
| RBI  | Rajasthan Bible Institute             |
| RSS  | Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh           |

## ABBREVIATIONS

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| RVKP   | Rajasthan Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad                              |
| SACW   | South Asia Citizens Web  |
| SC     | Scheduled Caste  |
| ST     | Scheduled Tribe  |
| UPC    | United Presbyterian Church                                     |
| USA    | United States of America                                       |
| USCIRF | United States Commission on International<br>Religious Freedom |
| VHP    | Vishwa Hindu Parishad  |
| VKP    | Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad  |