Tribals in Jharkhand: Religion and Identity Politics

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The recent controversy among Christian and non-Christian tribals over the portrayal of Mother Mary (statue) in Singpur village in Dhurwa near Ranchi, if not solved amicably, could have far reaching consequences for the social harmony of Jharkhand.

Divisive and fragmented politics of identity, even if not new, has led to the disintegration of social norms governing behaviour, thought, and social relationships. Not just that, they also have long term implications such as religious disputes, and even demand for separate state on the basis of language, religion, and political interests.

The recent controversy and divide among Christian and non-Christian tribals over the portrayal of Mother Mary (statue) in Singpur village in Dhurwa near Ranchi, if not addressed properly religiously and politically, is going to have far reaching consequences on the peace and harmony of the State in future. The statue shows a dark complexioned Mother Mary carrying infant Jesus Christ in a sling, just as tribal women do in a white Sari with a red border, on which the followers of Sarna (animist) Dharm have a reservation. Historically, tribes in Jharkhand follow Sarna Dharm (religion) and worship nature, particularly trees. However, with the advent of Christianity in the nineteenth century, a good number of tribals adopted or were converted to Christianity. The Christian population in Jharkhand is about 4.1 percent (Census, 2001), of which majority is tribals. Thus, the majority of tribals who later adopted or converted to Christianity also follow many traditions of tribal culture such as celebration of Sarhul, Karma and other festivities.

There were religious tension and divide in the past but it was never so pronounced as in the case of the depiction of Mother Mary in Red Sari which tribals following Sarna religion consider as interference and penetration in their religious cultural practices which is more related with their identity. Dharamguru (priest) of Sarna Society representing 32 tribes, Shri Bandhan Tigga says that “anybody can wear a white sari with red border but making mother Mary wear it seems to be a tactic to convert the Sarna tribals into Christianity. Mother Mary was a foreigner and showing her as a tribal woman is definitely not correct” (Kislaya: 2013). He considers it as a design of church to lure and confuse non-Christians tribals to establish Mother Mary as Maa Sarna. The Sarna Society under his leadership wants to remove that particular statue of Mother Mary or change the attire otherwise they
will forcefully remove the statue.

The Church has a different position on it and they believe that it has been unnecessarily politicised. The Cardinal Telesphore Placidus Toppo believes that there is nothing wrong in it as the Christian tribals have equal rights on the sari with the red border as the Sarna community. Fr. Augustine Kanjamala of the Society of Divine World (SVD) who specialises in the sociology of religion also feels that the depiction of Mother Mary in accordance with local culture and usage is legitimate from legal and theological standpoint.

Both the followers of Sarnas as well as Christians are firm on their position and it is difficult to take positions where faith, belief, identity, religion and claim of righteousness are involved. The issue is not to take a position who is right and who is wrong. The larger question is the politics of division in the name of religion and faith. Jharkhand is still struggling with the question of insider-outsider (Adivasis vs. non Adivasis); in such a situation, this new divide among tribals in the name of religion will further harm the fabric of tribal society in Jharkhand.

We also need to understand that this whole issue is incited by the few who want to get political mileage and fulfil their political aspirations. They are depicting it more as an issue of one's identity and culture where Sarnas are feeling that converted Christian tribals are taking the benefits (reservations) assigned for minority as well as for Scheduled Tribes which should be specifically given to tribals following Sarna religion. They also believe that converted Christians are not following tribal culture and religion, thus they should not claim them as tribals. According to Census 2001, Jharkhand has 26.3 percent of tribal population. Among them, 14.5 percent follow Christianity, 39.8 percent follow Hinduism, 0.4 percent follow Islam and the rest follow the other religion including Sarna religion. This shows that followers of Sarna religion among tribals are around 40-45 percent. In this case, although the Christians are in the minority in terms of numerical representation, many consider them as a strong social-cultural, political, and religious pressure group.

Besides this, Sarnas and many others also believe that tribals converted to Christianity are no more marginalised and are part of the mainstream. Although it is debatable, we need to understand that conversion to another religion do not automatically delinks one from age old cultural practices, believe, traditions, value systems, etc. There have been numerous instances where people have adopted cultural practices of other religions and maintained their original identity. In such a situation saying that converted tribal Christians are no more tribals is questionable. It will further widen the gap among tribals and develop mistrust for each other. We need to understand that tribal as an identity is a major unifying factor which binds tribals together irrespective of their religious practices and identities. In such a situation, it is important that Sarna tribals and Christian tribals should come together and amicably resolve this divide between them and defeat the dividing politics of the few for their political aspirations.
References:

