

## **Conference paper**

### **Panel: Indian Christianities, Integral Mission and Economies**

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#### **MISSION, MONNEY AND CONFLICT**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century could arguable be seen as a landmark in the history of Christianity in India. It is the century that gave birth to the Hindu nationalistic movement that would onwards be part of shaping the living conditions for India's Christians. The movement was born in a time of Hindu resurgence, and a time of strong opposition to the colonial power and missionary activities (Jaffrelot, 1996). The Christian missionaries did not only provoke controversy through evangelization, but also by their involvement in social reforms and policy changes in favor for the lower castes (Copland, 2006). By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Hindu reform movement would partly, through organizations like Arya Samaj, transform into a Hindu revivalist movement. These organizations propagated conversion to Christianity as a threat to the country and a way for foreign powers to increase their control over India (Jaffrelot, 2007). These ideas were enhanced by the mass conversions taking place during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which brought numerous of people into the Christian fold, enlarging the Indian Christian minority.

Accordingly, Christianity increasingly became associated with foreignness and the Western world and rule, even though Christianity had been part of the Indian religious landscape since at least the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Frykenberg, 2007). In view of Indian history, however, this is perhaps not so peculiar. Since the arrival of the Portuguese in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Christianity had been the religion of the westerners who gradually took control over the half continent. Moreover, under the Portuguese, the cross accompanied the sword in the search for spices, so to speak. The relationship between missionaries and the British colonial power was definitely more ambiguous, but Christianity continued for centuries to be the religion of the white man, of the foreign man (Robinson, 2003). And in terms of money, there was an evident inflow to the missionary organizations, which built schools, churches, orphanages etc. In other words, numbers of Christian institutions were built with money from abroad, on the Indian soil. So perhaps it was not so peculiar, that Dayananda Saraswati, the leader of Arya Samaj, depicted Christianity as a western religion and growing threat within the country.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Hindu nationalistic movement has grown significantly and more thoroughly formulated its Hindutva ideology. Through volunteer organizations like RSS and VHP it has reach all over India. Moreover, BJP – a Hindu nationalistic party, closely connected to RSS - has manifested its power by being the only political party able to challenge the Congress party on a national level. The party was in power 1998-2004, and will perhaps ones again rule India after the upcoming election in just a few weeks.

Hindu nationalism has without doubt been an important factor in spreading a negative attitude towards Christian mission. However, when it comes to conversion, the movement has not been alone with its skepticism. In fact, one can find a widespread ambivalence towards conversion in India, an attitude that has been advanced by several influential individuals, for example Mohandas Gandhi. In 1931 in *Young India*<sup>1</sup> Gandhi stated, “Every nation considers its own faith to be as good as that of any other. Certainly the great faiths held by the people of India are adequate for her people. India stands in no need of conversions from one faith to another”.

In the debate on conversion in India, Christianity has stood at the center of the critique for two reasons: (1) it is the minority with the strongest engagement in the missionary work(, and) (2) Christians have been accused by the Hindu nationalistic movement, as well as others, of alluring or forcing poor and underprivileged people to convert to Christianity. It is claimed that Christians are offering different kinds of material benefits in order to make converts (Bauman & Young, 2012).

I believe it is important not to dismiss the critique of Christian mission as antagonizing by a fundamentalist nationalistic movement. It is true that adherents of the Hindu nationalistic are offering the most persistent critique. At the same time Christian mission and conversion to Christianity are issues that have created tension and conflicts in India for over a century, and are is thus of importance for a development toward peaceful coexistence. The negative stance towards conversion has taken two very concrete forms; the anti-conversion laws and increasing anti-Christian violence.

The anti-conversion laws, officially called Freedom of Religion Bills, have been implemented in order to regulate conversion. At present, this law does not exist on a national level, nevertheless it has been implemented in several states around India. The Bills differ slightly from each other, but typically implies that the person who wants to change religion should give prior notice of about one month, and that no person should attempt to convert

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<sup>1</sup> A weekly paper published by Mohanda Gandhi between 1919-1932.

somebody else by “force” or “allurement”. In the Gujarati Freedom of Religion Bill, force refers to “force or a threat of injury of any kind including threat of divine displeasures or social ex-communication”, and allurement “means offer of any temptation in the form of any gift or gratification, either in cash or kind; grant of any material benefit, either monetary or otherwise” (The Gujarat Bill, 2003).

The laws are controversial and have been argued, in India as well as outside, to stand in conflict with the Indian constitution as well as violating Human Rights (Coleman, 2008). However, the Bills reveals that the issue of conversion, by ‘force’ or ‘allurement’ by material benefits, is not a periphery issue, but (a question that) has reached the level of state legalization. And at the center of this development stands India’s Christians.

Another concrete result of the anti-mission and anti-conversion segments in India is violence against Christians. Since 1998 violence against Christians has increased significantly (Bauman, 2013). Between 1964 and 1996 the United Christian Forum for Human Rights (UCFHR) estimated that there were only thirty-two registered cases of attacks. Today there are over two hundred registered attacks yearly, afflicting thousands of Christians. It would be a simplification to say that the violence is only a result of the clash between Christian mission and anti-conversion segments. However, when reading Indian newspapers and official reports of violence, conversion is quite commonly part of the story. For example, reading from The Evangelical Fellowship persecution report:

**28 March** - In Gadag, alleged Hindu extremists attacked Pastor Mallikarjun and four church members as they were distributing gospel tracts and filed a complaint against them alleging that they were forcibly trying to convert Hindus into Christianity.

**1 July** - In Vijayapura, Chitradurga, alleged Hindu extremists barged into the church and forced Pastor Kantharaj Hanumanthappa and the believers to stop the service, alleging that they are involved in forceful conversion.

Even if Christian mission is only one aspect of the growing anti-Christian violence, it is a well visible element in the discourse concerning violence. Quite telling is Swami Dayananda Srarswati’s open letter to John Paul II, in which he made following remark concerning conversion, “It is violence, and it breeds violence. In converting, you are also converting the non-violent to violence.”

In the light of this development, I would argue that an important question to ask is: are there some ambiguities about Christian mission in India? Does the Hindu nationalistic

portrayal of Christianity in India as foreign connected religion, utilizing money from abroad to allure the poor to change their religion, makes any sense?

Clearly, many Christian institutions and churches are supported by money from abroad (not only western countries) which gives them a noteworthy opportunity of doing social work, and using it as a tool to reach potential converts. For example, during one of my stays in India, I visited a Christian school in a village in Uttarakhand. Children from several nearby villages attended the school, which made the total number of children 600. The school offered a program for children with the poorest background, which were about 200 children. Each child was under a mentor who during the afternoons, five days a week, taught the child about hygiene, the importance of having a good physical health, handling emotions etc. Moreover, the child was given a package each month with hygienic and other articles, and the mentor visited the child's family several times each semester in order to better understand the needs and situation for the child and what one could help with. In other words, money from abroad enables Christians in India to reach out to non-Christians with significant means, which give rise to thoughts of foreign suspicion involvement.

This can be compared to a similar debate in Sweden, where critique has been raised towards donors in Saudi Arabia sponsoring imams, the construction of mosques and establishment of Muslim private schools in Sweden. In a debate article in *Expressen*, a Swedish evening paper, the headline was (my translation): "Save the children from religious private schools", which was followed by the ingress "Saudi billionaires are sponsoring private Muslim schools and are spreading their ultraconservative interpretation of Islam. The Muslim private schools can easily transform into a recruitment area for future suicide bombers". This comparison is of course precarious. Nonetheless, the establishment of "the Other" through institutions and social work seems to be upsetting in India, as well as in Sweden.

Furthermore, it is not difficult to identify activities among Indian Christians that could be interpreted as alluring vulnerable people to convert, thus going against the anti-conversion laws. For example it is quite common to find guaranteed admittance to Christian schools, reduced tuition fees, and the possibility to get a personal foreign sponsor. In a field study I conducted among Pentecostals in north India in February this year, it became clear that the social work Christians are doing easily can be interpreted as a type of bribe. Many churches are involved in helping the poor by distributing blankets, cloths, food and other items, but also more significant objects – for example one of my informants told me that not long ago, an old woman, who had for some reason been rejected by her family, came to the pastor of his church and asked for help. The pastor asked her, what he could do for her and she told him

that she had nothing, not even somewhere to live. In order to help her, the church constructed a small house for her where she could live. Accordingly, one could clearly say that Christians social work do materially benefit potential converts, especially from poor backgrounds. That a religious institution is helping vulnerable people is of course not a wrong-doing. On the other hand, the claim by Hindu nationalistic groups that Christians are offering material benefits to potential converts is not false.

Moreover, a few of the informants told me about the practices of Christians in their surroundings that could be more easily categorized as allurements or force. It should be said that they were very critical of these practices, and spoke of the Christians doing it as causing conflict between Hindus and Christians. For example, one informant told about churches where he came from, among which there were a spirit of competition to have the highest number of members. In order to raise the number of members, some churches gave money or cows to Hindus if they joined the church. Another informant told me about a Christian hostel nearby his village which used to baptize all the children, even those with Hindu background. This was done in order to show high numbers of baptisms to their foreign sponsor and thus increase the chance for further support. I have no numbers of how common these practices are, but the fact that they occur problematizes the position that the allegation of “forced conversion” or conversion by bribery is to be regarded as fabrication.

In conclusion, I would like to make clear that the argument of this paper is not to advocate that the Hindu nationalistic movement is right in their allegation that Christians with the help of foreign money are alluring the poor to the Christian fold. Moreover, I consider the use of this allegation highly problematic as many other scholars (see e.g. Zavos, 2001; Melancthon, 2002; Bauman & Young, 2012). On the other hand, I would like to stress that there are cases of ethical ambiguity in Christian missionary activities, and that the inflow of foreign money and how money is used in mission, is part of creating the existing tensions. In a time when anti-Christian violence is increasing and a growing number of states are passing anti-conversion laws, these questions seem to be of utter importance.

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