BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Wessly Lukose, Filadelfia Bible College, Rajasthan, India. Email: wessly@fbcudaipur.com

Why has India been witnessing an unprecedented increase in anti-Christian violence since the 1990s? Why is the Bhil Tribal Community in North India turning to Pentecostalism in huge numbers? Drawing on an ethnographic study among the Bhils of southern Rajasthan, Sarbeswar Sahoo tries to deal with these central questions in his book *Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India*, to explain the issues of religious conversion in India.

Although religious conversion has been one of the most muddling concerns in the Indian subcontinent since the colonial era, it has become a highly sensitive and burning matter today. With the Hindu nationalist party BJP coming to power at the centre of government, *Sangh Parivar* and its alliances effectively use conversion as a divisive dynamism in the nation. In such a context this volume tries to explain the incompatible definitions of conversion by Hindu nationalists and Christians.

The book has four chapters apart from the Introduction and Conclusion. The introductory chapter argues that with BJP in power, the *Sangh Parivar* wants to accomplish their nationalist agenda by shifting focus away from Muslims to Christians as they are threatened by the increasing Christian missionary activities. Although the Hindu militants are not necessarily aware of the difference, diversities and contradictions among Christians in India, the active engagement of Pentecostals in conversion and the subsequent increase in tribal conversion to Christianity drew the attention of Hindu nationalists who sought measures to stop conversion.

Chapter 2 examines the development and growth of Pentecostalism in Rajasthan, especially among the Bhil Tribal community. Sahoo argues that Pentecostalism has brought transformation in various aspects of tribal lives, and it attracts more tribals who are socially and economically weak, because of the healings and miracles. He also examines the complexity of the conversion issue arising from socio-economic reasons like the reservation criteria. Reservation is a system of affirmative action in India for historically disadvantaged groups, including tribals. Christian tribals face discrimination based on religion for the reservation is denied once they are converted to Christianity, though there is reservation policy for tribals.
Chapter 3 argues that Christians and Hindu nationalists hold opposite views on conversion. For the former, conversion is a spiritual transformation while for the latter, it is a purely religious one with political connotations. Sahoo examines four narratives to understand diverse perspectives on conversion in the tribal context of north India. He identifies four social groups (stakeholders), namely Hindu nationalists, Christian missionaries, tribal converts, and Hindu tribal community. Hindu nationalists see conversion as induced action of intolerance against Hindus and a violation of the constitutional rights of religious freedom. Christian missionaries see conversion as a spiritual act which is integral to the understanding of religion, and not allowing it is intolerance and violation of religious freedom. For converts, conversion is a matter of faith, free will and spiritual transformation, from which they should not be prevented. For Hindu tribals, conversion is a force that undermines traditional faith, creates cultural boundaries, and breaks down community living and social solidarity.

Chapter 4 focuses on the experiences of Pentecostal tribal women in south Rajasthan. It examines two crucial questions: why a large number of tribal women, compared to men, turn to Pentecostalism and what motivates them to break away from their traditional religious beliefs. Following Hanneke Slootweg, Sahoo attempts to provide an ethnographic perspective on the lifeworld of Pentecostal tribal women, considering four interrelated aspects such as the conversion experience, miracle healing, male-female interactions, and socio-economic conditions. He concludes that the life-transforming spiritual and material changes of the Pentecostal tribal women in Rajasthan stand as testimonies and credible explanations that the alleged materialistic incentive hypothesis of conversion by the Hindu nationalists is erroneous.

Chapter 5 tries to explain the increasing violence against minorities, particularly Christians. Sahoo argues that there is a direct relationship between the rise of Hindutva nationalist BJP and the increasing violence against Christians. The Sangh Parivar organizations have collaborated with the state of Rajasthan to strengthen their political ideology and the implications of such association. Christian missionary activities in the tribal areas of Rajasthan have complicated the Hindu nationalists’ perspective on conversion. It has created post-colonial anxiety and fear among Hindu nationalists and the consequent rise of the BJP to power has radically transformed the political climate. It has also strengthened the relationship between religion (Hinduism) and politics.

Sahoo argues that both Christian missionaries and Sangh Parivar are involved in competing projects of conversion and have been using development programs and service activities as media to reach out to tribals and convert or reconvert them. Sangh Parivar has used various development programs to oppose missionary activities and politically motivated tribals to favour BJP to be in power. Consequently, the BJP government has provided ideological, political, economic, and legal support to the activities of Sangh Parivar. Therefore, Sahoo argues that the BJP-led state in Rajasthan became partially responsible for the rising violence against Christians.

The book concludes that Pentecostalism in Rajasthan is predominantly a “tribal religion,” and that it has helped tribals to convert to “modernities.”
growth of Pentecostalism among the tribals needs an explanation beyond the “materialistic incentive discourse,” which is a usual accusation of Hindu nationalists against Christians.

This book is an excellent addition to religious studies as it focuses on conversion, one of the most debatable issues in the Indian subcontinent. The interdisciplinary approach to the problem further increases the significance of this volume. Sahoo considers all four relevant stakeholders including Christian missionaries, tribal converts, Hindu nationalists, and the Hindu tribal community in his ethnographic field study, to make a historical, sociological, and anthropological analysis. Although it is a remarkable contribution to Pentecostal studies in India, in my view, the title further complicates the issue. As Hindu militants wrongly see Christianity as synonymous with colonialism and its followers in India as agents of foreign nations, the title may mistakenly strengthen this view. Paradoxically, Indian Pentecostals have a strong aversion to politics. It seems to me that a few arguments in the concluding chapter need further support of data. For example, Sahoo states that it cannot be argued that material incentives do not play any role in the conversion experience as some people converted purely for material gains. However, no supporting example is included in the narratives of conversion experience of tribals. Similarly, he strongly argues that the mainline churches are uncomfortable about the Pentecostal enterprise of conversion, without any discussion of the relationship between Pentecostals and non-Pentecostals. There is also a misleading statement that Christianity spread beyond Kerala only during the colonial period. Despite all these, I highly recommend this book to all who are interested in Pentecostalism as well as religious conversion in India.