

Asia Research Centre Working Paper 7

**IDENTITY, HEGEMONY, RESISTANCE:  
CONVERSIONS IN ORISSA, 1800-2000**

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# Identity, Hegemony, Resistance: Conversions in Orissa – 1800-2000

## IDENTITY, HEGEMONY, RESISTANCE: CONVERSIONS IN ORISSA, 1800-2000\*

### **The Problem:**

It is widely held that as far as Hinduism is considered, the concept of conversion does not exist. Traditionally, it is said that one cannot *become* a Hindu by conversion, since one has to be *born* a Hindu and indeed, innumerable tracts, articles and books have been written on the subject.<sup>1</sup> However, as this paper will attempt to show, the ground realities of social dynamics would appear to suggest something different and this premise (that one cannot *become* a Hindu) may, in a profound sense, be open to contest. One can cite here the history of the adivasi peoples and their absorption into brahminical Hinduism - a social process that would, in fact, point to the gaps and contradictions existing between this kind of traditional belief (in the impossibility of 'conversion' to Hinduism) and the complexities of actual cultural practice on the ground. In other words, this paper seeks to argue that the history of the indigenous peoples would instead seem to suggest that, in an important sense, Hinduism did 'convert', and the paper further goes on to raise the question whether adivasis and outcastes were/are Hindus in the first place.<sup>2</sup>

'Common-sense' dictates that this absence of a system of conversion within Hinduism makes it by implication, more humane, tolerant and perhaps superior to proselytising religions like Islam and Christianity. This, in fact, may be said to be one of the subtexts of the political discourse, especially over the last fifteen years or so. However, it needs to be pointed out that the roots of such a perception that proselytising faiths are the 'Other' go back a longer way. While colonial exploitation and its association with Christianity have, among other features, contributed to the creation of this idea, colonial and post-colonial communal politics, and more recently, Hindu fundamentalism, have sustained it. Here we should mention the stereotypical images of Christianity as fiercely proselytising that one encounters in parts of India, more specifically in urban/coastal Orissa today. After the gruesome murder of the missionary Graham Staines and his two children, it was quite normal to encounter people who made it appear as if padres were waiting around every corner in Orissa to convert you.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly enough, however, while the idea of conversion is presumed to be an impossibility in Hinduism, the concept of *re-conversion* - or *shuddhi* as it is defined since the 19<sup>th</sup> century - is considered acceptable to most scholars<sup>4</sup>. In contemporary India, for instance, we witness a great deal of fanfare and media reports on the occasion of the 're-conversion' of adivasis to Hinduism.<sup>5</sup> What is lost sight of here seems to be the fact that adivasis were perhaps never Hindus to begin with. After all, can we locate adivasis as those who are 'born as Hindus'? This

implies that at least here re-conversion is actually conversion. However, there is in general an unquestioning acceptance of their *re-conversion* to Hinduism – which goes hand in hand with an unquestioning acceptance of their original Hindu identity. In other words, their Hindu identity is taken for granted, which makes the notion of a re-conversion perfectly possible, acceptable and even justifiable<sup>6</sup>. One finds in all this, of course, a set of contradictions, which homogenises all sections of adivasis and outcastes as Hindus.

One has to bear in mind here that in the case of the adivasis and the outcastes, this process of ‘Hinduisation’ or ‘integration’ into the ‘varna’ order involves complex shifts in their identities. The question is whether it is possible for the latter to be actually seen as Hindus, while being simultaneously located as the outcaste Other?<sup>7</sup> More importantly, it needs to be emphasised that this process of ‘integration’ into the caste order involves a silent process of change, through which power is established over the adivasis and outcastes in order to exploit them.<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, the present paper questions and interrogates the way conversion has been understood. It accepts that Hinduism does not convert in the same way as perhaps some other religions do. However, it argues that some process of ‘conversion’ can be traced among the adivasis and outcastes over the last two hundred years in Orissa – a process that was marked by the interplay of a host of complex features, rooted in shifting material conditions and identities.

### **Existing Studies:**

Without going into too much detail, let us make a brief survey of some of the existing studies in order to understand how the process of conversion has been understood. As already pointed out, the existing scholarship does not recognise conversion to Hinduism. A typical theme of course is the focus on individual converts<sup>9</sup>. However, in other contexts one also comes across some scholars who explore large-scale conversions. A study of coloured slaves who converted to Christianity in North America can be cited as an example. Here the stress seems to be clearly on religious encounters, with sudden disruptions that mark abrupt changes in their outlook towards life and themselves.<sup>10</sup> A study of a community in Africa explores the ‘generational’ aspect associated with the converts to Christianity. It recognises the importance of colonialism and argues that for the first generation, conversion was a decisive encounter with power that subsequently developed an anti-colonial and revivalist orientation, which was followed by an attempt to give Christianity a firm African grounding.<sup>11</sup> Another work, while examining conversions in contemporary North America, talks about crisis points when colonial powers

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disrupt and in some cases destroy the existing socio-cultural reality of the indigenous people.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, both these attempts externalise the process of conversions and by linking it to colonial expansion neatly overlook the internal dialectics of a colonial society. After all, religious conversions did not result only with the advent of colonialism. Moreover, the latter work, although sensitive in accepting that conversion is a complex, multi-faceted process involving personal, cultural, social, and religious dimensions<sup>13</sup>, only hints at the economic world, which is not clearly delineated.

One should refer to the importance - the relevance as well as the limitations - of the concepts of sanskritisation and Hinduisation while dealing with conversions. Sanskritisation was a route through which low castes were able to rise - over one or two generations - to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by sanskritising their ritual and pantheon. One can agree with this as long as it accepts that such shifts were linked to some degree with upward economic movement and was not a one-way process.<sup>14</sup> Another problem inherent in this formulation is that it abstracts caste from deeper economic processes and does not see the level of violence inflicted on the adivasis and their ideas while negotiating with this process. Given its long history this is normally left unrecognised. In fact, even sensitive socio-anthropological studies sometimes categorically assert that Hindu civilisation did not on the whole seek to convert or displace tribals, although they agree that conflicts were frequent, and tribes were forced to retreat to the 'remotest areas' – viz. the forests and mountains.<sup>15</sup> Taken together, these contradict the 'civilisational' claims of Hinduism<sup>16</sup>. In fact, if anything, the opposite seems to be the case. Thus, one witnesses a process of hegemonisation, through which brahminical Hinduism actually operates. Its exploitative content vis-à-vis those who were incorporated and hierarchised, while being 'Hinduised', should not be missed<sup>17</sup>. Similarly, it was/is marked by a high degree of exclusiveness, involved in the very idea of keeping the order of varna 'clean' and 'pure', especially when it comes to those who are located as the outcastes as are also sections of adivasis.

One has also to mention here that this process was not a one-way affair. It was/is not only contested and interrogated, but also changed/evolved. It was/is marked by a host of complexities which have to be taken into account by any social historian.

**The Pre-colonial Background:**

Talking specifically about pre-colonial, but especially, early medieval Orissa, scholars like Bhirabi Prasad Sahu highlight the dynamics of the feudalisation of this region. The manifestations of this process included at one extreme the emergence of intermediaries and superior landlords and at the other end the reduction of peasants and artisans to the position of semi-serfs. As suggested, the caste system developed late in Orissa and when it did (viz. the c. 10-11<sup>th</sup> A.D.), certain specificities and differences in comparison to the Indo-Gangetic plain model marked it. This was primarily because of the preponderant tribal population and the geographical variations in the region (viz. the coastal tract and the hilly/forested interior). As a result, the land grants to Brahmins and the extension of agriculture implied the conversion of most of the tribes into Sudras, which converged, with the process of their peasantisation. Alongside this their chiefs were absorbed as Kshatriyas into the varna system. This implied the absence of any rigid polarisation. The classic four-fold varna system continued to remain largely notional, as in practice the two tier-structure with the numerous intermediary occupational castes constituted the functional reality. Consequently, one witnesses the evolution of two clearly identifiable varnas - the Brahmins and the Sudras. The Vaishyas were not really visible in society, though men of substance appropriated this status for themselves. This implied that the Vaishyas surfaced in the epigraphical sources only occasionally in times of trade. Similarly, the Kshatriyas never had local roots, and were created in this period of state formation (viz. clan to caste society) that saw shifts in the identity of adivasi chieftains, who invented this category for themselves. The rise of the Kshatriyas/Karanas was a feature associated with the emergence of feudalism. As delineated, the varna system was a major legitimising force in this process of state formation.<sup>18</sup>

One can also perhaps refer to the research on the Bengal frontier by Richard M. Eaton for a slightly later period. He demonstrates the way in which agricultural expansion involved the process of Islamisation of the adivasis.<sup>19</sup> What is fresh about these two approaches is their openness and the way they engage with a reality that saw shifts. Whereas in pre-colonial Orissa it meant Hinduisation, in the case of the Bengal frontier it was associated with Islamisation. In the case of both, one sees the way the non-Hindu adivasis were integrated into the process of feudalisation, with the expansion of agriculture.

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### **Colonialism and the Shifts and Changes:**

In the context of Orissa, colonialism reinforced the existing situation through various interventions - but most significantly through the land settlements and monetisation that it introduced. One obviously important point was a sharpening of the caste/class polarisation which had a clear association with the agrarian interventions, irrigation, commercialisation of agriculture (howsoever limited) and an increasing degree of monetisation.<sup>20</sup> In fact, a very superficial survey of some of the available land settlement reports of the Temporarily Settled areas of Cuttack, Puri and Balasore, the princely states and some of the major zamindaris illustrates the rather serious fall-out of the agrarian interventions, especially the way they polarised social relations centred around caste.<sup>21</sup> These had a bearing on the question of conversion since the land settlements entailed a set of complex negotiations with the adivasis. The specificities of the context are perhaps reflected in the way the Ranas of Jeypore wore the 'sacred thread' and believed that they had bought the right to do so from the maharaja of Jeypore<sup>22</sup>. What deserves emphasis is the significance of this language of exchange that was applied to the sacred realm. We also witness the Gonds of Sambalpur inventing new legends to re-locate themselves within the framework of Hinduism, and the Gond zamindars wearing the 'sacred thread'.<sup>23</sup> These practices not only implied a degree of Hinduisation, but also a strategy to cope with the agrarian interventions. Here one can also mention the Kandhas of Ranpur (princely state) who preferred to be identified as 'Oriya Kandhas' that indicates an allied component of the process – Oriyaisation.<sup>24</sup>

One witnesses a continued importance - but even more so now - of the Kshatriyas. After all, the colonialist needed to have 'settlements' with 'rulers' – especially the princes and the landed zamindars. Here the classic varna system was invoked to get the legitimacy for the alliances with the Kshatriyas who were the 'rulers'. Starting from the raja of Puri - who was 'a king without a kingdom'<sup>25</sup> - this interaction reinforced the pre-existing order of things we have already encountered, along with Orissa's colonisation. The other vital component included the relatively affluent agriculturists - including a section of the adivasis. Many from this section emerged as 'rich' peasants over the nineteenth century. Here one is talking about those who did well in the new 'production for the grain market' environment and claimed Khandayat - the Oriya variant of Kshatriya - status. Khand means a sword and Khandayat means sword wielding. In fact, this caste accommodated a wide variety of the prosperous section of the adivasis as well. This implied a level of Rajputisation/Kshatriyaisation that converged with Hinduisation, and affected the affluent sections of the adivasis.<sup>26</sup> Some of the references in the Census Reports offer clues to understand this process. For example the first Census mentions the presence of 'numerous' Savaras (adivasis) in the Cuttack and Puri tract.<sup>27</sup> At the same time,

a very superficial survey of the tribal population shows a decline between 1891 and 1941 in some parts of Orissa, although there is no serious reason to explain this. One also sees a very large increase of the Khandayat population - 45.4% (the largest for any caste) - between 1901 and 1931 in the Orissa Division and the Orissa States<sup>28</sup>. One needs to grasp here that a large number of adivasis identified themselves as Khandayats. Consequently, the connection between a decline of the adivasi population and the phenomenal increase of the Khandayats should be borne in mind while discussing the question of conversions and Hinduisation in Orissa.

Hinduisation and its associated complexities implied a stress on, among other things, vegetarianism and meant a shift in the dietary habits. This has a special significance especially since it implied a certain degree of stability with regards to agricultural production and affluence of a section of the adivasis. Thus, it was not really easy for the unsettled pahariah adivasis, engaged in shifting cultivation to accept it.<sup>29</sup> Besides being looked down upon by the brahminical order, the relative inaccessibility to and their lesser dependence on the market - at least in the early years of the nineteenth century - meant that they had no serious desire to convert. In fact, the violent colonial encounters with the adivasis in the hills, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century, created conditions where it was no longer possible for them to manage their livelihoods and many were forced to shift over to Hinduism or get marginalised as outcastes.

Shifting identities marked the phenomenon of conversion. For example, one witnesses some 'advanced' Binjhals - a tribe in the Sambalpur region - claiming Rajput status and adopting the practice of burning their dead.<sup>30</sup> The emulation related to the disposal of the dead symbolised an attempt to get incorporated into the brahminical order.

Given this complexity, it is in fact quite usual to come across innumerable references to a fractured adivasi reality, which spoke of two chief categories of adivasis - the plains people and the pahariah or dongariah (viz. pahar = hill; dongar = shifting cultivation) adivasis - with the colonial establishment clearly admiring the former.<sup>31</sup> Most adivasis who converted to Hinduism, at least in the initial years - via the varna system - retained their specific social and religious customs. The brahminical order was quite comfortable with this aspect. After all, they were 'ancient people' who had to maintain their customs. This process implied that while being integrated they were also being hierarchised. Thus, it would be, for example, difficult to talk about adivasis gaining acceptance as Brahmins.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the Rajputisation scheme and categories like 'haliya' Brahmins have to be borne in mind while explaining the limits upto

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which such transgressions could be accepted<sup>33</sup>. These were the most common routes through which the process of conversion seems to have been channelled. The adivasi chiefs and the affluent sections got linked to the varna order through these. Thus, what one witnesses is their ‘acceptance’, with clear boundaries and hierarchisation. Here one can refer specifically to the Hinduised Kandhas of Puri, for example, who had to employ Brahmin priests. More significantly - given their position in the hierarchy of caste – they had to employ ‘low Brahmins’ from among low caste Hindus, who were elevated as a consequence as well.<sup>34</sup> This was in striking contrast to affluent non-Brahmins, including Telis - oilmen - who aspired for upward social mobility and were accepted as patrons of and donated to the Utkala Brahmin Samiti, established in 1899. Thus, 47 out of 217 who contributed to it in 1906 were non-Brahmins.<sup>35</sup> Consequently it illustrates a process where class and social position mattered.

As we have mentioned, diet and social position were closely related features when it comes to the question of conversions of the adivasis. This was precisely another vital reason that kept the landless, outcastes out of this process. If anything, their position in fact got marginalised with the polarisation of the caste system. They were distinctly classified as the Other. This meant that whereas some of the adivasis were forced to shift over (via the caste-formation process) to Hinduism, the landless outcaste was a major threat not only to the ‘purity’ of the varna system but also to the colonial system as it were. Thus whereas some of the ‘animists’ were ‘civilised’, the landless outcaste had to be ‘tamed’ and negotiated with as ‘criminal classes’.<sup>36</sup>

Consequently, there appears to be a shift from the pre-colonial times, in the way the adivasis were re-located. This was the result of a very complex dialectical process, involving the varna system which seems to have opened up a space for ‘integration’, by incorporating a large section of the adivasis as Khandayats/Kshatriyas, and adivasi society itself negotiating with the new context and adopting conversion as a part of a broad survival strategy. Among many complex features, one witnesses that most of the big zamindars and especially the princes - many of whom were literally colonial constructs - went all out to prove their association with the adivasis. This became vital to prove their ancient-ness. Many folk tales that were invented to establish this also served the purpose of securing legitimacy and exercising power over the adivasis.<sup>37</sup>

The colonial officialdom was largely influenced by this ‘integrative’ component and found the brahminical order - especially the cult of Jagannatha - to be one of colonialism’s greatest legitimisers.<sup>38</sup> In fact, this was a cult, which was one of the most significant inventions



associated with the princes and zamindars. There were pre-colonial efforts in this direction. Thus the process of urbanisation in most of the capitals of the princes and bigger zamindaris, recreated a Jagannatha temple, with a 'bada danda' (big street) in front of it, and the annual ratha jatra – modelled along the lines of Puri. Orissa's colonisation perfected this drive.<sup>39</sup> What is significant from the point of view of the present project is the emphasis on the oral tradition that highlighted the Savara (an adivasi community) origins of Jagannatha. Perhaps it formed the most vital component through which the colonial system and the internal ruling classes (princes and zamindars) negotiated with a region that had a very large adivasi population. One can illustrate this by citing the example of the Pengo Parajas of Koraput, who began using Jagannatha's mahaprasad for 'purification' rites.<sup>40</sup> Though purificatory rites did exist among adivasis in some form or the other, what was new was the entry of the mahaprasad into these cultures. Thus, if one argues about the specificities of Hinduisation/peasantisation which were intimately associated with the process of conversion, then one has to keep the Jagannatha cult in mind. Although one can notice continuities with the eighteenth century, the power of the cult was never felt so seriously, given its links with the efforts of the colonial establishment and the internal ruling classes to extend and tap agricultural resources over the nineteenth century.

These features associated with the expansion of the Jagannatha cult co-existed with drives to build Hindu temples in parts of western Orissa. Here one can specifically refer to the temple-building project of the tahsildar Dinabandhu Patnaik. The scheme involved building a Sibamandira (temple for Shiva) in 1855 at Bisipara. This was Patnaik's headquarters. In fact, it was not built only by the people of Bisipara, but by people of the Khondmals region, through bethi.<sup>41</sup> In this way, Hinduisation made deep inroads into western Orissa.

Thus, in this section, one has focused on the emergence of a system - however invisible it might have been - to direct the conversions to Hinduism. This entailed mainly two methods. The first was comparatively non-violent and long drawn, and, in this sense, a hegemonic process. Although it had pre-colonial roots, it was substantially altered over the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> The second included a set of terror campaigns of the coloniser and his privileged tenure holders in the hills.<sup>43</sup> These were marked by sudden disruptions.<sup>44</sup> The magnitude of this latter process is difficult to fathom unless one also keeps in mind the decimation of the adivasis - owing to the conflicts with colonialist (and his feudal collaborators) - in the nineteenth century who had to start from scratch and were forced to convert, or join the outcastes. What is striking is the way this process saw the relative unity of the different constituents involved with the conversion of

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the adivasis: the brahminical order, the internal exploiting classes and last but not the least colonialism.

As seen, this process saw continuities as well as the shifts and changes, if compared to the pre-colonial context. Thus, the Khsatriyaisation component seems to have continued on a much wider scale incorporating the non-pahariah adivasis into the 'order' of Hinduism, unlike in the early medieval period, where most of them were sought to be 'integrated' as Shudras. In fact, the nineteenth century saw a toning down of this process, unlike what has been observed by Sahu for early medieval Orissa.<sup>45</sup> Thus, what we see is a complex process that saw the co-existence of Hinduisation/peasantisation/Kshatriyaisation/Oriyaisation, with the colonisation of Orissa. It was largely inclusive vis-à-vis the already peasantised adivasis, or those who - with the exception of the pahariah folk - opted to work as settled agriculturists. This was in a context of major agrarian interventions and drives that saw a significant shift towards moneytisation and the growth of a market for agricultural production. The landless section was mostly from among the outcastes and the pahariah adivasis. It constituted the mass of people who worked as landless labourers or those who migrated out to far off places in search of employment – a feature that seems to have started prior to Orissa's colonisation, but which became clearly so over the nineteenth century.<sup>46</sup>

### **Questions of Identity and Resistance:**

In this section we examine the complexities associated with the world of those who were converted. The questions of identity and resistance are implicit components of this section. After all, the changeover was never complete. The opposition/resistance and interrogation took various forms. The most visible were the adivasi rebellions that dot Orissa in the nineteenth century. The period upto the mid-nineteenth century saw major offensives taken against the hill people and here the idea of 'civilising' the 'barbarian' seems to have made the colonial machinery resort to brute terror. The price for being 'civilised' included unpaid labour that was extracted to build the communication links, crucial to extend power and control the hills. This included erosion of traditional rights over forests which was a particular problem for the pahariah adivasis<sup>47</sup>.

That the varna logic gripped the colonial machinery is quite clear from the way it stereotyped the Kandhas as a tribe that resorted to meriah (human) sacrifice. Besides the fact that all Kandhas were not associated with it, the colonial offensive overlooked many aspects, including

the fact that some of the princes and zamindars were not only involved with it, but also encouraged this practice. Most importantly, its necessary to emphasise here that the idea of a human sacrifice itself was based on a survival strategy - against a set of conditions that marginalised the world of the adivasis and sought to terrorise them to submit.

Resistance was also visible in the development of popular cults like the Mahima Dharma, as a counter to Hinduisation and upper caste domination. This was especially triggered off by the post-1866 Famine context, which made life extremely difficult - even for those who survived - if they had accepted relief ('chattrā') from the centres established by the colonial administration since they were ex-communicated. We witness the emergence of Chattrā Khia as a new caste (outcaste), directly associated with this period<sup>48</sup>. The Mahima cult not only resisted the varna order but posed a serious challenge to it. It attracted the Kandhas as well. In fact, one of its leading exponents was Bhima Bhoi - a blind Kandha - who is associated with a host of fascinating *bolis* (compositions). People who became associated with this plebeian cult were expected to begin a new chapter of their life, without any reference to their past. This aspect, associated with the 'deletion' of one's memory with regard to one's past, implied transcending the varna boundary which had got rigidified over the post-1866 phase. Its inclusive credentials and its rapid success in the western tracts implied a mixed response. Whereas the varna order was alarmed by it and attributed it with apocalyptic visions<sup>49</sup>, some of the feudal chiefs (like the chief of Dhenkanal) emerged as its champions. In a context of disruptions and changes, reinforced also by the famine of 1866 that rigidified the caste system and severely undermined the process of Hinduisation, its appeal to the adivasi and outcaste population made the Mahima cult particularly attractive to negotiate with the adivasis and the outcastes.

This socio-reformist movement that united the western and the coastal tract, was also marked by its ambiguity vis-à-vis colonialism. This latter aspect is perhaps demonstrated in the way its followers did not take up Christianity, which made its presence particularly felt in the coastal tracts in the immediate context of the Famine and also in the western tracts over the nineteenth century. Here one has to keep in mind the question of selectivity - Christianity was, after all, closely identified with colonialism and the process that had devastated the world of the adivasis and the outcastes. At the same time, the cult's stress on the missionary character perhaps reveals an attempt to draw from this component of Christianity. What we see in the cult is a co-existence that relates to an aloofness from Christianity, a silence vis-à-vis colonialism and an opposition that was directed against the varna order and the process of Hinduisation.

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One should also mention here diseases like smallpox, that offer fascinating clues to understand the way adivasi society negotiated with the phenomenon of Hinduisation. Smallpox spelt doom for the Kandhas of Subarnaghurry in 1860. This was identified to be a problem associated with the presence of the Paikas (an erstwhile martial caste which got increasingly involved in agriculture, and also included some who were the converted adivasis) in their 'country' since they were 'the means of getting the *Sircar* and causing smallpox to prevail among them'. The Kandhas felt that if the Paikas were expelled then they would enjoy peace and comfort. About fifty Kandhas, led by Jagoo Pojaree and armed with battle axes, bows and arrows went to the village Goomahgoodah and 'shouted aloud to murder all the Paikas who hid in their houses'.<sup>50</sup>

We also witness the invention of the *Dharma Pinnu* - the smallpox goddess - by the Kuttia Kandhas to cope with the disease. *Dharma Pinnu* was seen as the source of smallpox and worshipped at all agricultural festivals. Interestingly, she was identified as an Oriya (Hindu) goddess living in the lap of luxury. Ceremonies were performed in her honour just before sowing in the hill clearings. The invocations at her special ceremony were made in Oriya and the offerings were not the normal millet and rice beer but milk, *ghee*, rice and *mohwa* liquor.<sup>51</sup> That this reflected a part of a broader survival strategy of the indigenous people to negotiate with the process of Hinduisation becomes clear since even the Didayi also invented their goddess *Mata*, who represents a close parallel of the *Dharma Pinnu* of the Kandhas.<sup>52</sup>

What we see is the fusion of a set of highly complex strands that reflect a process of contesting the conversion drives in the hill tracts as well as attempts to get accommodated into the varna order. The Paikas were hated because they not only represented an exploitative order linked with colonialism, but also because they symbolised the process of Hinduisation. Consequently, what we witness is a link established in popular cosmology between the colonialist and the non-tribals - including tribal converts - who were associated with their exploitation and the conversion drives.

What also needs to be emphasised is that the smallpox goddesses that emerged out of the complex interaction with the process of Hinduisation, occupied a rather central position. Moreover, the offering of *mohwa* (liquor) and *pana* (a ritualistic drink), the special invocations to her in Oriya and the idea of abandoning her at a lonely spot outside the village limits illustrate two simultaneous processes - of contesting Hinduisation and those who were seen as its representatives in the hill tracts and also an attempt to negotiate and accommodate her/get accommodated within the varna order.

### **Conversions to Christianity:**

We will next take up the question related to the conversions to Christianity. This was rather nuanced, and not as simple as it is normally made out to be either in the missionary tracts or the Oriya press.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, it should be made adequately clear that the magnitude of conversions to Christianity was hardly felt in the region, in spite of the projections. The association of Christianity with colonialism was the most serious stumbling block and this perhaps explains why it was never seen as a serious option, although serious efforts were made in this direction and many outposts were created for the purpose.

After saying this one should perhaps delineate certain complexities associated with the shift to Christianity. In a context of uncertainties and insecurities the Oraons, for example, felt that Christianity protected them from the witches and bhoots, who were powerless against this system.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, like the converts to the varna order who participated in the Hindu as well as tribal festivals, the converts to Christianity observed certain customs and beliefs that were antithetical to the basic tenets of Christianity. They participated in tribal festivals and when asked about their identity, mentioned their tribe, suppressing the Christian connection.<sup>55</sup>

### **The National Movement and Hinduisation:**

The Indian national movement seems to have made a distinct mark on the process of conversion. In the specific context of Orissa, Gandhian politics seem to have been very influential. Perhaps this would have not been possible if Hinduisation and the process of conversions, along with other associated complexities, had not prepared the background to Gandhian politics. In fact, Gandhian politics saw the advent of a new phase in the history of conversions. Adivasis and outcastes in large numbers gave up beef and liquor.<sup>56</sup> Gandhian ideas of renaming the outcastes as 'Harijans' made deep inroads into the different parts of the region.<sup>57</sup> What is significant is that although the issues affecting the outcastes were never taken up for any questioning or confrontation, its inclusive component brought in this section into the movement. What was witnessed was an extension of the process of Hinduisation, that co-existed with a social-reformist current which sought to 'integrate' the adivasis and the outcastes to the anti-colonial struggle, without confronting the brahminical order in any way.

It is very important to emphasise here that for the marginal sections - the adivasis and the outcastes - vegetarianism was a major sacrifice, especially for people who were not settled agriculturists, and who did not have any stable source of income. After all, it meant giving up

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readily available food from the forests and rivers, or, when someone's cow in the village died.<sup>58</sup> Gandhism re-worked the logic of Hinduisation by providing a space and a possibility - howsoever limited - to the outcastes and the adivasis to get a limited access, especially in terms of gaining some self-respect in their immediate environment and through this incorporated a large number of them into the struggle against colonialism. Thus the details related to satyagrahees selected from Jeypur (1940-41), for the 'individual satyagraha', mentioned 'agricultural labourers', most of whom, besides spinning khadi, gave up eating beef and drinking liquor. We are told about adivasis working in the Harijan bastis for 'their uplift', and about an adivasi aspirant stopping an early marriage.<sup>59</sup>

This meant a tug of war between the national movement and the colonial establishment/feudal landed sections in Orissa, centred around the process of Hinduisation itself.<sup>60</sup> One can cite here the way some drunken mehtars (sweepers - outcastes) were deputed (by the colonial administration) to be on the roads, to discourage people from attending a meeting in Khurda town during the Non-Co-operation Movement<sup>61</sup>, or why common feasting that was adopted as a strategy to unite the state people was viewed so seriously by the Nilgiri durbar in 1937<sup>62</sup> and the attempts by the Dhenakanal durbar to divide people along lines of caste.<sup>63</sup> Even the limited electoral process associated with the 1937 elections saw elements of this.<sup>64</sup> Under pressure of the mass movements the colonial/feudal order tried to re-work the process of Hinduisation, by imposing the brahminical order. After all, they wanted to retain control over something which they themselves had so seriously nurtured over the nineteenth century. At the same time, one has to say that given the nuances and the complexities of Gandhian nationalism in Orissa it also reinforced both Hinduisation and the conversion of the adivasis and outcastes, with its inclusive and 'integrative' character. What can be seen is the way Hinduisation emerged as a contested site between the colonial/feudal order and Gandhian nationalism. This meant a new thrust when it comes to the question of conversions in the post-1920s.

With the growth of the Left in Orissa in the 1930s, it was swept by powerful peasant movements and the state peoples' movement (in some the princely states). The Kisan Sangha and the Prajamandal worked on the idea of class-based struggles that not only challenged the colonial/feudal order but also Gandhian politics. Although historians have highlighted the way the Left movement contested colonialism and the exploiting classes - who in the context of Orissa included the princes and the zamindars - the way class-based unity threatened Hinduisation also needs to be stressed<sup>65</sup>. This meant a serious concern for both the

colonial/feudal order and the Orissa Congress, prompting serious action in some enclaves, like Nilgiri, against the Communists.<sup>66</sup>

The anti-imperialist struggle also demonstrated the way Christianity acquired new meanings among its converts. Thus, the Mundas of Gangpur – a princely state, where the Prajamandal movement was virtually non-existent – perceived it as a weapon to fight their oppressors, and as an instrument of solidarity. In January-February 1939, there was a no-rent movement, which was led by Nathaniel Munda. The immediate issue centred around the sudden increase in the rate of rent – which had been raised by about 100 to 150 per cent over the 1910 Settlement. The states' people submitted a petition to the Rani and the officials at a meeting on 2 February 1939. This was attended by about 5,000 people from nearly 30 villages and it reflected the anti-feudal aspirations of the people, which had been kindled by the Prajamandal movement and by the 'native' preachers. It included the abolition of bethi, customary levies and a host of oppressive features. The adivasis appealed to the Viceroy when the durbar failed to respond. However, even this did not solve their problems.

This created the basis for a no-rent movement in the state. Out of a population of 60,000 Mundas there were 17,000 Lutherans and the rest were Roman Catholics. The Lutheran Mundas rebelled and it is possible that they were translating into action the plebeianised version of Christianity as preached by their 'native' preachers, in line with their own perceptions, since the Lutheran mission was initially indifferent to the movement. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church found the rent hike to be reasonable and felt that in the long run this would be beneficial to the people since they would work harder. Its hold seems to have been quite strong since its position was largely accepted by its following.

By the end of March 1939 the no-rent movement was launched. Nearly 5,000 Lutheran Mundas withheld rent, though the rest of the Lutherans and the Catholics continued to petition against the durbar. As the movement gathered momentum the position of the Lutheran establishment shifted from indifference to anxiety. Two Munda pleaders from Ranchi and the 'native' preachers influenced its following. In its anxiety the durbar approached the Lutheran Church Council (Ranchi) to send a deputation to negotiate with the rebellious Mundas. The deputation reached Gangpur in early April, but failed in its efforts. In fact, after this the secretary of the Church advised the diwan to take strong measures since, he felt, only this would make the Mundas 'see reason'. This precipitated ruthless terror directed against the Mundas, in which thirty-two people died and nineteen were injured in course of a police firing.<sup>67</sup>

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This rebellion shows the pluralities associated with Christianity in Orissa. Instead of being a legitimising component of the durbar, one witnesses its subversive character in Gangpur. Thus, in course of the rebellion the Mundas not only rose against the durbar and its exploitative practices, but also refused to accept the codes of the Church and confronted colonialism. The way Christianity was transformed by some 'native' preachers, and interpreted by the Munda converts to become a weapon in their struggle, demonstrates its complexities and pluralities, given its association with popular aspirations and militancy.

### **Independence and After:**

Like many other features, the process of conversions and Hinduisation associated with it continued after India became a free country. The compulsions of the new state and its efforts to establish itself saw a new thrust. The administration in Orissa stuck to symbols that had made deep inroads in the region, like the Jagannatha cult. One is reminded here about the Bondas - an adivasi community of Koraput - who had to go through revenue settlements in the 1950s and 1960s. A method - that clearly harped back into the colonial past - saw the district administration selecting the oldest looking man in the village, who was 'declared' to be the maharajah, through whom the settlement was apparently negotiated. He was given a rusty sword and a wooden chair as his throne. And although he complained to me that he was among the poorest people in the village - worse than 'the king without a kingdom' - the administration had managed to achieve its mission<sup>68</sup>. After this the process of imposing the new 'gods' and the brahminical order began in the region, which had remained somewhat isolated from the process of Hinduisation.

In the absence of colonialism, the situation with regards to opting for Christianity also changed. In the 1950s some Kandhas, for example, adopted Christianity, which was no longer identified with the government and offered a defence against Hindu exploitation<sup>69</sup> and the process of Hinduisation.

The situation has indeed altered since the 1980s with a level of unprecedented homogenisation and religious polarisation.<sup>70</sup> Communalism and divisive politics have entered Orissa and have attained a high level of aggressiveness. This has been legitimised not only by the political process, but also by the electronic and the print-media, and by scholars and intellectuals<sup>71</sup>. Alongside, the middle class has earned for it some degree of respectability. Communalised perceptions seem to cloud the real world of poverty, hunger, unemployment which is indeed a



cruel joke if one goes by the fact that we are talking about a state where more than 55 per cent of the people and 89 per cent of families live below the poverty line. Orissa in the present context seems to pose a serious set of problems for the very existence of ‘civil society’ and it is here that one needs to understand the deeper problems in case one has to confront them.

**Conclusion:**

A major aspect of this paper relates to interrogating ideas associated with conversions in the context of colonial and post-colonial south Asia. Although it focused on Orissa, some of the complexities observed would be visible in many other parts of India as well. While most studies assume that conversion is not possible with regard to Hinduism, this paper situates the shifting material conditions and identities as well as the evolution and changes in society to emphasise how this actually happened. The process associated with conversions, given its complexities, was far from being a one-way affair. As discussed, it was based on inter-actions, and saw the adivasis/outcastes themselves being involved with a desire to both contest and get incorporated into the order of caste. An allied feature was the development of popular cults and Christianity that emerged to challenge brahminical Hinduism, with the shift to Christianity gathering momentum after the retreat of colonialism. Taken together these features demonstrate aspects of selectivity associated with the adivasis and outcastes. This paper ends with the present context and refers to the politics of difference that marks the region since the 1990s. It emphasises how this poses a serious threat to the very existence of civil society.

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\*This forms part of an on-going project and I am thankful to the Asia Research Centre, London School of Economics and Political Science for the Ratan Tata Fellowship which made it possible for me to do the research for this paper. I would like to thank Prof. Meghnad Desai and the participants at the Orissa Research Programme Conference, 'Periphery and Centre: Groups, Categories, Values in Orissa', Salzau (Germany), 23-27 May, 2001, for their suggestions and comments; and Prof. K.N.Panikkar and Prof. Gyanendra Pandey for their encouragement. I would like to thank Ms. Joanne Hay for all her help at the LSE and Dr. Indrani Sen for helping with the editing.

I am grateful to the helpful staff of the Libraries and Institutions that I used for my research: the different sections of the British Library, the Libraries of the LSE, the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), and the Wellcome Institute (all at London); The University Library at Cambridge and The Bodleian Library at Oxford.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>There are a few exceptions; Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant eds., *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, Cassel, London, 1999. In the introduction, 'Conversion: Contours of Controversy and Commitment in a plural World', 1-19, the editors raise a question: 'Is there conversion to Hinduism?' This is resolved unsatisfactorily when they articulate that 'ethnic religions like Hinduism...seem less concerned with conversion except in so far as it is a negative force they have to confront'; 1, 3. See also chapter one Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, 'Converting: Stages of Religious Change', 23-34. Here they argue that on 14 October 1956 five hundred thousand Mahars 'renounced their Hindu faith and embraced Buddhism, transforming them from being Untouchables to Buddhists'; 33, which implies that they were Hindus. Subsequently, in chapter 2, Donald Taylor, 'Conversion: Inward, Outward and Awkward', 35-50, argues that conversion is not a burning issue within Hinduism and becomes one only when Hindus come into contact with other religions. The traditional conservative Hindu – whom he identifies as members of the RSS or the Arya Samaj – would not accept that a non-Hindu can convert to Hinduism. As he puts it: 'According to their way of thinking a person must be born a Hindu'; he finds this reasoning 'quite logical'; 43. This is perhaps the most illogical argument seen in the light of the present paper, more so if one is talking about the adivasis and outcastes.

<sup>2</sup>Most of the material – especially the articles and some of the books – is of very poor quality. It's a very long list of books and articles, which talk of conversions mostly to Christianity, but also to Buddhism and are centred on case studies of individuals. I would like to mention two scholars who look at adivasis as non-Hindus in the pre-colonial period - Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, 'Orissan Society: Past and Present Manifestations'; paper presented at the Training for Development of Scholarship Society', Pune, 1987; and his 'The Brahminical model viewed as an instrument of socio-cultural change: An autopsy' in the *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 1985*, Indian History Congress, Delhi, 1986, 180-92; and Richard M. Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian History*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2000, chapter 11, 'Who are the Bengali Muslims? Conversion and Islamisation in Bengal', 259-75.

<sup>3</sup>I have written about this; see 'Orissa Today: Fantasy and Reality', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. XXXV, no 18, 29 April 2000, 1516, for details.

<sup>4</sup>G.A.Oddie ed., *Religion in South Asia: Religious Conversion and Revival Movements in South Asia in Medieval and Modern Times*, Curzon Press, London, 1977. In fact J.T.F. Jordens, 'Reconversion to Hinduism, the Shuddhi of the Arya Samaj', 145-69, accepts this unquestioningly.

<sup>5</sup>Interestingly, although defined as Hindus the entry of dalits is not *actually* allowed into the temple of Jagannatha. They are/they are not is a logic that is invoked to explain many things in the strangest possible ways. Thus, as argued by the Puri Sankaracharya a few years ago Harijans need not go into the temples since God himself will come to them; interview in the *Illustrated Weekly of India*, 24 July 1988.

<sup>6</sup>Oddie, *Religion* the introduction refers to 'tribal' or 'primitive' religions within Hinduism, along with as those influenced by beliefs and practices more characteristic of the 'brahminic tradition'; 1. A rather crude homogenisation results in such assertions.

<sup>7</sup>See for example Kancha Ilaih, *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva, Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy*, Samya, Calcutta, 1996, to get an idea of this dimension.

<sup>8</sup>In fact, Max Weber, *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (Trans. By Hans H. Gereth and Don Martindale first published Free Press, USA, 1958), The Free Press, New York and Collier-Macmillan, London, 1967, mentions how through this power/control was established over these people. He calls this 'discriminatory integration' in the social and economic sense, when it comes to the adivasis; 11-12; 16-17.

<sup>9</sup>Oddie, *Religion* is a classic example. Scholars like Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai's Feminist and Christian Conversions: Focus on Stree Dharma-Neeti*, SNTD Women's University, Bombay, 1995, Uma Chakravarty, *Re-writing History: Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Kali for Women, Delhi, 1998; and Gauri Vishwanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity and Belief*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1998, are more nuanced and accept the pluralities/complexities associated with the conversions to Christianity, Buddhism etc., which co-existed with a shift to question Hindu patriarchy and caste oppression.

<sup>10</sup>'God Struck Me Dead - Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Negro Ex-Slaves, 1945', Social Science Source Documents, No 2, Microfilm, British Library; this study is based on the evidence taken from one hundred individuals; i-iii.

<sup>11</sup>Cyril C. Okorochoa, *The Meaning of Religious Conversion in Africa: The Case of the Igbo of Nigeria*, Gower Publishing Company, Vermont, 1987.

<sup>12</sup>Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1993, 54.

<sup>13</sup>Rambo, *Understanding*, 165.

<sup>14</sup>M.N.Srinivas, *Religion and Society among the Coorgs of South India*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1952, 30-31. As he puts it, this was possible, especially for those in the middle regions of the hierarchy; 30. This perhaps implies some degree of affluence that needs to be stressed. I would like to refer here to Max Weber, *The Religion of India* and his 'diffusion model'. The basic problem with this is that it locates this as a one-way process, involving the Hinduisation of tribal beliefs.

<sup>15</sup>Felix Padel, *The Sacrifice of Human Being: British Rule and the Khonds of Orissa*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, 17.

<sup>16</sup>A major exponent of this 'civilisational' character of Hinduism is Ravinder Kumar. I am not aware of any serious work by him on the subject, though he has published short newspaper pieces. This right-wing position veils the basic components of terror and violence directed against the adivasis and outcastes by brahminical Hinduism.

<sup>17</sup>While disagreeing with most of what Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications* (Translated by Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont and Basia M. Gulati), Chicago University Press, Chicago and London, 1980, says I find his formulation that brahminical Hinduism incorporates and hierarchises very valuable.

<sup>18</sup>Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, both references. Hermann Kulke, 'Kshatriyaisation and Social Change: A Study in Orissa Setting', in S.D.Pillai ed., *Aspects of Change in India: Studies in Honour of Prof. G.S.Ghurye*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay 1976, focuses on the issue of Kshatriyaisation in the context of medieval Orissa and extends its relevance upto the seventeenth-eighteenth century A.D. He emphasises this as more useful/relevant than Brahminisation and the functional reality. Surajit Sinha, 'State Formation and the Rajput Myth in Central India' in Hermann Kulke, *The State in India, 1000-1700*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, feels that the diffusion of the Rajput model of the state and the indigenous developmental processes could gain ground only among those tribal groups who had attained the technological level of settled agriculture. Thus, as he puts it, we do not find shifting cultivating groups like the Juangs or the Hill Bhuiyas of Orissa developing a kingship supported mainly by their primitive technique of cultivation. However he makes it clear that it was not essential for the use of the plough to determine the rise of kingship; 335. Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, 110-16 also refers to certain aspects of 'rajputisation' affecting some of the adivasi communities. Interestingly, H. Beverley, *Report on the Census of Bengal, 1872*, Bengal Secretariat Press, Calcutta, 1872, mentions the absence of a 'pure' Kshatriya caste in Orissa and refers to the Khandaits - swordsmen - who formed the erstwhile militia and who took their caste from their profession which corresponds to the military class in the four-fold division of northern India; 193.

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<sup>19</sup>Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, California University Press, Berkeley, 1993, and his essay 'Who are the Bengali Muslims?'

<sup>20</sup>One has to be very cautious to accept the variations between the erstwhile Mughalbandi - coastal tract - and the western interior. For details see Sanjib Rout, 'Rural Stratification in Coastal Orissa, 1866-1900' in *Social Science Probings*, vol. 3, no. 1, 1986, 136-50; Pradipta Chaudhury, 'Peasants and British Rule in Orissa', *Social Scientist*, vol. 19, no. 7, August-September 1991, 28-56; and, especially, Shakti Prasad Padhi, *Land Relations and Agrarian Development in India: A Comparative Historical Study of Regional Variations*, Centre for Development Studies, Thiruvananthapuram, 1999, for the variations between the coastal and the western tract.

<sup>21</sup>For details Biswamoy Pati, *Resisting Domination: Peasants, Tribals and the National Movement in Orissa (1920-50)*, Manohar, Delhi, 1993, chapter 1.

<sup>22</sup>Nilamani Senapati and N.K. Sahu, *Orissa District Gazetteers: Koraput*, Government Press, Cuttack, 1966, 110.

<sup>23</sup>L.S.S.O'Malley, *District Gazetteers: Sambalpur*, Superintendent of Government Press, Patna, 1932, 70. Nilamani Senapati and B. Mohanty eds., *Orissa District Gazetteers: Sambalpur*, Orissa Government Press, Cuttack, 1971, 117 refer to Gond zamindars wearing the 'sacred thread'.

<sup>24</sup>G.N.Singh, *Final Report on the Original Survey and Settlement Operations of the Ranpur Ex-State Area in the District of Puri*, ? Berhampur, 1963, 10.

<sup>25</sup>After all, the raja of Puri was actually the raja of Khurda, which was taken over by the British. The Khurda raja was, in fact, re-invented as the Raja of Puri - and Orissa - and compensated as the superintendent of the Jagannatha temple; for details, see Hermann Kulke, 'The struggle between the rajas of Khurda and the Muslim subahdars of Cuttack for the dominance of the Jagannatha temple' in A. Eschmann et al ed., *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, Manohar, New Delhi 1987, 345-57.

<sup>26</sup>Leading anthropologists like F. G. Bailey, *The Civility of Indifference: On Domesticating Ethnicity*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca and London, 1996, also see the Oriyas as migrants to the Kandha hills. As he puts it, in the 1950s, Oriyas were about 3 in every 8 of the population, and he feels that they were probably fewer at the beginning of the century; 3. Although the question of Oriya migrants cannot be disputed, he cannot conceptualise their emergence from among the Kandhas itself. Thus, the hillman/plainsman dichotomy is a feature haunting even sensitive scholars like him. What needs to be also borne in mind is a complexity where 'Oriyas' - besides being migrants - emerged from among the adivasis in the pre-colonial and colonial period, as we have sought to demonstrate. Thus, castes like the Warrior caste that he refers to (Paikas or Khandayats) also emerged from among the Kandhas and other adivasi groups. This in fact illustrates the process of conversions of adivasis via Hinduisation/Kshatriyaisation/Oriyaisation, and his reference to the Oriyas should also be seen as an extension of this process that was perhaps 'happening' even while Bailey was doing his field work in the area. Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, in fact, mentions how those who sought assimilation got integrated with the Hindu community and through this the 'barbarians' who formed the ruling stratum 'secured their superiority over the subject classes'; 16.

<sup>27</sup>Beverly, *Census of Bengal, 1872*, 191.

<sup>28</sup>Based on W.G. Lacey, *Census of India, 1931, vol. VII, Bihar and Orissa Part I: Report*, Superintendent Government Printing, Patna, 1933, 267.

<sup>29</sup>Here one has to keep in mind Sinha, 'State Formation and the Rajput Myth in Central India', see f.n. 18.

<sup>30</sup>Nilamani Senapati and B.Mohanty eds., *Sambalpur*, 118; O'Malley, *Sambalpur*, 70 refers to 'rich' Binjhals being burnt.

<sup>31</sup>Lieutenant Elliot (Deputy Commissioner of Raipur) 'Report on Kalahandi State, 28 July, 1856' cited in Nilamani Senapati and D.C. Kuanr, *Orissa District Gazetteers: Kalahandi*, Orissa Government Press, Cuttack, 1980, 473; hereafter Elliot's Report.

<sup>32</sup>Some scholars tend to over-emphasise the 'openness' of the caste system in Orissa; see for example, Gaganendra Nath Dash, *Hindus and Tribals: Quest for a Co-existence (Social Dynamics in Medieval Orissa)*, Decent Books, New Delhi, 1989, 16-17.

<sup>33</sup>Haliya Brahmins included those who took to agriculture (hala=plough) mostly in the coastal tract. Most probably it included some who desired upward social mobility, or sections of Brahmins who faced marginalisation.

<sup>34</sup>O'Malley, *Census 1911*, 235.

<sup>35</sup>*Utkala Brahmana Samitira Sastha Barsha Bibarani*, Oriya: Puri, 1906.

<sup>36</sup>R. Clarke, 'Panas of Orissa' in M. Kennedy, *The Criminal Classes in India*, 1907 rptd. Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1985 appendix 324-29, indicates a classification strategy that incorporated this thrust. In fact, Clarke's idea was to rehabilitate them in Angul by giving them 'good' land and loans. Needless to say, the ideas related to the outcastes were most clearly influenced by the upper caste tradition of Orissa. References to the Oriya proverb 'chora chandala' (viz, thief and an outcaste, which suggests an interchangeability) indicates deep connotations which should be borne in mind while trying to locate the way the varna order located the outcaste.

<sup>37</sup>Even a cursory look at most of the Revenue Settlements reports illustrates this aspect. One can also cite here 'The Brief Histories of Each of the 24 States (1909)', R/2 (285/1), Crown Representative Papers, India Office Library, London. Elliot's Report, mentioned specifically the coronation ceremony where a Khond Pat Majhi of a particular Khond family, was dressed specially for the occasion. A rich cloth was thrown on his lap, on which the raja sat during the ceremony. This custom is said to have originated at the time of some ancestor whose name was unknown since 'the legend has been lost'; 478-79. Nilamani Senapati and Nabin Kumar Sahu, *Orissa District Gazetteers: Balangir*, Orissa Government Press, Cuttack, 1968, refer to a legend of the Binjhals (adivasis). According to it, the mother of the first Chauhan raja of Patana had taken shelter in the hut of a Binjhal, where she gave birth to Ramai who became the king of Patana and made the Binjhal the chief of Borasambar; 103. As can be seen, the theme of Kshatriyaisation and the idea of securing legitimacy from the adivasi population were a dominant theme of these customs and legends.

<sup>38</sup>Interestingly the process began with the taking over of Orissa in 1803 itself. We are told about how the governor-general had made a 'famous pandit of Bengal' write a letter assuring the Puri Brahmins of the religious tolerance of the British. Shortly before reaching Puri, the British troops were informed by the priests that 'they had applied to Juggernaut' who had a 'decided answer ... that the English Government was in future to be his guardian'; cited in Hermann Kulke, 'Juggernaut Under British Supremacy and the Resurgence of the Khurda Rajas as Rajas of Puri', in Eschmann et.al eds. *The Cult of Jagannatha*, 346.

<sup>39</sup>Hermann Kulke, 'Kshatriyaisation and Social Change', 403-4, refers to the pre-colonial origins/spread of this cult and specifically to the building of Jagannatha temples in the second half of the nineteenth century. This phenomenon becomes clear if one looks at most of the Revenue Settlement Reports of the princely states or the big zamindaris, or studied the architectural pattern of the 'castle towns'.

<sup>40</sup>K.N. Thusu, *Pengo Parajas of Koraput*, Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, 1977, 15.

<sup>41</sup>Bailey, *The Civility*, 18-19; bethi means forced labour. This co-existed with the drive to build Jagannatha temples mentioned earlier.

<sup>42</sup>As long as one sees things in the perspective outlined in this paper, one can agree upto a point with Srinivas, *Religion and Society*, regarding the role of caste in enabling Hinduism to proselytise without the aid of a church; 31.

<sup>43</sup>As pointed out by Weber, *The Religion of India*, this process was marked by a certain degree of internalisation of the caste hierarchies of the Hindu order by the underprivileged strata; 18. I have discovered this particular aspect in parts of coastal Orissa during my own field-work in the 1990s.

<sup>44</sup>For some idea see Biswamoy Pati, 'Environment and Social History: Kalahandi, 1800-1950' in *Environment and History*, vol. 5, no. 3, October 1999, 345-59.

<sup>45</sup>Both references have been cited earlier.

<sup>46</sup>As can be seen, this process began in the coastal tract and spread into western Orissa over the nineteenth century. The issue of migration in Orissa is another area that has received scant attention. It obviously had pre-colonial origins. We get a reference to a strike by the Oriya teeka bearers of Calcutta in May/June 1827; based on Bengali newspapers, compiled and edited by Anil Chandra Dasgupta, *The Days of John Company: Selections from Calcutta Gazette, 1824-1932*, Superintendent Government Printing, Calcutta, 1959, 214. This action was related to the government's move to licence them. Their opposition was based

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on the assumption that this would arm the government with powers to ‘convert’ them into company servants and requisition them for public duties. This is particularly significant since it perhaps shows their knowledge of the working of forced labour recruitment in their ‘homeland’.

<sup>47</sup>For details, *Resisting Domination*, chapter 1.

<sup>48</sup>L.S.S. O’Malley, *Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers: Cuttack*, Superintendent of Government Press, Patna, 1933, 60.

<sup>49</sup>For some details see my chapter, ‘The High:Low Dialectic in Fakirmohana’s *Chamana Athaguntha*: Popular Culture, Literature and Society in Nineteenth Century Orissa’ in *Situating Social History: Orissa (1800-1997)*, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2001, 44.

<sup>50</sup>Home Department (Public Branch), nos. 60-61 (A), 24 January 1861, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

<sup>51</sup>N.A. Watts, *The Half Clad Tribes of Eastern India*, Orient Longman, Bombay, 1970; offering *mohwa* to an ‘Oriya’ goddess indicates the contestation aspect.

<sup>52</sup>Uma Guha, *et.al The Didayi: A Forgotten Tribe of Orissa*, Anthropological Survey of India, Delhi, 1968.

<sup>53</sup>Talking about the missionary tracts, Anon, *A Brief Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Baptist Church Orissa Mission*, Mission Press, Cuttack, 1858 is a typical example, which refers to Gunga Dhor (one of the early converts) testing the divinity of Jagannatha by abusing ‘him’ and scratching ‘his’ back with a pointed iron, since he had not responded to his petition, or the Oriya newspapers like *Utkala Dipika* 9/2/1867; 23/2/1867, which projected the activities of the Christian missionaries in the context of the 1866 Famine.

<sup>54</sup>E.T.Dalton, *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*, Government Press, Calcutta, 1872, 247.

<sup>55</sup>Senapati and Sahu, *Koraput*, 121-22.

<sup>56</sup>See for example All India Congress Committee Papers, File no. P20/1940. I am not for a moment discounting the pluralism associated with the perceptions of Gandhian calls for solidarity that *also* included drinking liquor or distributing opium after ‘looting’ them from shops – actions that invoked the name of the ‘Mahatma’. However, at this point I am examining the issue from the side of the people who accepted the ideas of vegetarianism and gave up beef and liquor.

<sup>57</sup>One can cite here the surname Harijan adopted by dalits in western Orissa – a feature I have encountered during field work.

<sup>58</sup>Bailey, *The Civility*, 39 in fact refers to the Panos and the idea of enjoying a meal when someone’s cow died. Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995, touches upon the issue of vegetarianism and abstinence from liquor; chapter 15, 101-6. However, what eludes him is the fact that this was a very major sacrifice for the marginalised adivasis and the outcastes. Besides animal flesh and fish, it meant giving up *salapa* and *tari* that could be tapped from the trees in the forests, or *handia* that could be made at home. Together it meant giving up major constituents of one’s diet.

<sup>59</sup>All India Congress Committee Papers, File no P20/1940, Private Papers Section Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi. This list was sent by the Orissa Congress Committee to the General Secretary of the All India Congress Committee.

<sup>60</sup>I am using the word feudal to refer to the despotic chiefs and some of the oppressive zamindars.

<sup>61</sup>*Searchlight*, 22 February 1922.

<sup>62</sup>Nilgri Praja Andolana Compilation Committee, *Nilgiri Praja Andolanara Itihasa* (Oriya: ‘History of the Nilgiri Prajamandal’), Balasore, 1982, 64; *Krushak* 3 January 1938.

<sup>63</sup>All India State Peoples’ Conference, file no. 129, (hereafter AISPC) Nehru Memorial Museum & Library, New Delhi.

<sup>64</sup>S.N.Mozumdar, *Report on the General Elections in Orissa - 1937*, Orissa Government Press, Cuttack, 1937, 14-16 refers to the Raja of Puri - Jagannatha’s earthly incarnation - distributing mahaprasad at Kanika and seeking the pledges of the voters in support of the Kanika Raja. But as observed the voters bowed to the mahaprasad dropped their ballot paper in the Congress Box, bowed again and walked out -

adequate apologies were thus made to the Lord. Accepting the 'new' by apologising to the old implied a structure of continuity that 'modern' democracy inherited. The Congress techniques of mass contact and electioneering included vote *geeti* sung by *sankirtan* parties. In some areas Hindu sadhus held in high esteem campaigned for the Congress. In one case a Congress candidate who had chosen blue as his colour was believed to have chosen this at the instance of Jagannatha whose Chakra was of the same colour. Yellow - the colour of the Congress was located as an auspicious colour given its association with Hinduism. Pictures of Hindu gods/goddesses also appeared on the election posters. Such complexities implied a transition that reinforced a degree of Hinduisation into the electoral process itself.

<sup>65</sup>I say this as a point of self-criticism related even to my earlier work, *Resisting Domination*.

<sup>66</sup>AISPC file no. 124; interview with Banamali Das May, 1982. What is clear is a level of collaboration between the Central Congress leadership, the Orissa Congress, the durbar and the colonial establishment when it came to 'containing' the Communists of Nilgiri. The fact that the militant class-based struggles of the Nilgiri Prajmandal threatened to obliterate the hierarchies of the brahminical order by uniting the state people – including the outcastes and the adivasis – needs to be borne in mind while explaining this anxiety.

<sup>67</sup>Home Political, 18/2/1939; 18/3/1939, National Archives of India, New Delhi; All India Congress Committee, Private Papers G12/1937-39, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi; *National Front*, 18 June 1939.

<sup>68</sup>I have seen both the sword and the 'throne' (wooden chair); interviews in the Bonda hills, Koraput: May-June 1980.

<sup>69</sup>Padel, *The Sacrifice*, 10.

<sup>70</sup>There have been quite a few writings on this subject; see especially K.N.Panikkar ed. *Concerned Indian's Guide to Communalism*, Viking Penguin, Delhi, 199.

<sup>71</sup>I would like to point to the large number of studies that project the Jagannatha cult as 'Orissa's cult'. Here I would include A. Eschmann *et.al* ed., *The Cult of Jagannath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, Manohar, Delhi, 1978.

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