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Conversions and Transformations:
Missiological Approaches to Religious Change

Anthropology of Religious Conversion in India

Abstract

Usually, when conversion is discussed in India, it is done in the context of conversion to Islam and Christianity alone. In reality, however, conversion has been going on all through the history of India. Anthropological studies on India show that through a process of absorption, assimilation and conquest, a process of Sanskritisation or Hinduisation has been taking place. Once a tribe came under the influence of the Brahminical people and was converted into a caste enjoying monopoly in a particular occupation, a strong tendency was set up within it to remodel its culture more and more closely in conformity with Brahminical way of life. Like the tribals who were assimilated to Hinduism, the non-Aryan i.e. the Sudras and Ati-Sudras were also assimilated and Sanskritised.

With regard to conversion movements to Christianity, several Hindu fundamentalists say that there were forceful conversions in the last 500 years. Studies on conversion movements indicate that this is a much more complicated problem. The conversion movements among the Dalits and tribals have shown the potential of social change in religion. The mass conversion of tribals to Christianity is related to the tremendous socio-economic and cultural changes brought about by westernisation and modernisation.

Sociologically, conversion is a process of change from one religion to another. It is something that is used by the individual to move forward in society. Their shackles might be those of caste, of illiteracy, of economic slavery, of psychological apathy. But all these factors are always inter-linked.

The methodology used in this study is one of secondary sources from ethnographic works by eminent anthropologists and other scholars. Resources are also drawn from different Indian news papers and reports from Non Government Organizations in India.

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