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Religious freedom and the subversive adaptation of Christian converts from Hinduism

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Abstract

This paper explores how converts to Christianity tend to navigate a complex social landscape by occupying hybridized sites seeking to remain Hindu while following Christ. This strategy is especially visible in *Krista Bhakta* (Christ followers) movement, the upper caste groups who see a cultural continuity with the Hindu traditions. Using "hybridity", a concept that Homi Bhabha popularized to capture the mixing of Eastern and Western cultures in postcolonial literature, this essay explores how it can be applied in the religious sphere that adopts this subversive tool within political and cultural spheres.

Keywords

Religious freedom, hybridity, Christ followers, Hindu converts, India, Krista Bhakta.

1. Introduction

In the Indian subcontinent, Freedom of Religion or Belief (FORB) is increasingly becoming constricted by majoritarian politics that specifically targets Muslims and Christians. Building on an injured social psyche about its colonial past, the nationalist agenda tends to alienate the minorities by tying their identities to the foreign oppressors: Muslims with the Moghul invasion and Christians with the British Raj. Consequently, religious converts feel that they have to prove their loyalty to the nation in the light of accusations of betrayal.

Building on my earlier work on the issues pertaining to the problematization of religious conversion (John 2021a; John 2021b), this paper examines how the nationalist Hindu identity builds on a colonial calculus to erase plural identities.

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Following that, the paper uses a postcolonial framework to identify the hybridized adaptations in the *Krista Bhaktas.*

2. An independent nation and a continuing colonial calculus

Understanding the phenomenon of religious conversion involves decoding the ways religious conversion manifests itself in the lives of converts. Why do some break with tradition while others seek continuity with it? These varied responses indicate that the experience of conversion is mediated by sociological and political factors, including the way modern religious nationalists use colonial strategies and tactics in an attempt to marginalize minorities and create a religiously unified nation-state.

Religious strife on the subcontinent has led to genuine security crises, including terrorist attacks, but government officials tend to exaggerate these dangers for political gain. One could argue that religious nationalists learned this strategy from the colonial rulers who had mastered this art. The British, it is argued, "took advantage of local conflicts to control Gujarat much like a Mafia boss intimidating shopkeepers to extort protection money." Similarly, nationalist movements in post-independence India use "fear and protection" to advance their cause (Hebden 2011:24).

One such fear, cultivated even against expert opinion, is that Hindus will become a minority in India due to high birth rates among Muslims and an increasing number of conversions to Christianity (Salam 2021). This fear of shifts in religious demography reflects a fear of losing traditional Hindu culture. These alleged threats are used to portray religious minorities as enemies who are at once foreign and yet within the gates. Setting up this imminent threat enables religious nationalists to assume the role as protectors of the nation's religion and culture.

This role gives nationalist politicians the opportunity to consolidate greater powers, justified by the perceived danger. Such consolidation requires the identification of something singular that unites the nation. Thus, the nationalist movement's slogan, "Hindi – Hindu – Hindustan," (*The Times of India* 2017) envisages a strong monolithic state with one language and one religion, which ironically "is not a call to return to a true and ancient religion of India, but to a modern version of the Brahminic faith that assimilates or marginalizes castes and communities for political ends" (Hebden 2011:27).

This modernized, politicized Hindu identity introduces additional cross-pressures for those whose lives are circumscribed by the calculus of an embedded universe.[2] For instance, festivals that honour local deities have increasingly given

2 An embedded cosmos is one where the individual is nested within the community, and the community within a cosmos also inhabited by gods, goddesses, and the spirits.

way to pan-Indian celebrations. The idea of one God who unites all the people of the land indicates a movement towards a form of monotheism. The Dalitbahujan intellectual Kancha Ilaiah records his autobiographical journey from devotion to the familiar gods of his childhood, such as "Pochamma who delivers from smallpox, Kattamaisamma who grants rain, or Potaraju who protects crops from thieves," to encountering "unfamiliar Hindu gods like Vishnu or Durga" (Basu 2020:2). Shifting allegiance from the former gods and goddesses to newer ones affects the perception of the embedded universe within Dalitbahujan communities. Ilaiah speaks of such shifts as a form of coercion "into joining a national majoritarian community that he, and people like him, never belonged to, in terms of piety or way of life . . .. The question that Ilaiah, in effect, poses is whether the whole thing is simply a Brahminical minority's historical masquerade as a Hindu majority" (Basu 2020:2).

Religious nationalism aims to realign the social fabric and its polarities. In the former social order, communities were organized along caste hierarchy, whereas the new order defines them in terms of religion. Ilaiah describes the cross-pressures that a Dalitbahujan faces in this political environment:

> [N]ot only I, but all of us, the Dalitbahujans of India, have never heard the word 'Hindu,' not as a word, nor as the name of a culture, nor as the name of a religion in our early childhood days. We heard about Turukoollu (Muslims), we heard about Kirastaanapoollu (Christians), we heard about Baapanoollu (Brahmins) and Koomatoollu (Baniyas) spoken of as people different from us. Among these four categories, the most different were the Baapanoollu and the Koomatoollu. There are at least some aspects of life common to us and the Turukoollu and the Kirastaanapoollu. We all eat meat, we all touch each other. With the Turukoollu we shared several other cultural relations. We both celebrated the Peerila festival. Many Turukoollu came with us to the fields. The only people with whom we had no relations, whatsoever, were the Baapanoollu and the Koomatoollu (cited in Basu 2020:1).

One of the implications of this realignment is the greater alienation of religious minorities through their integration into the category "Hindu". Uniting the nation under common gods and religious narratives, rather than returning to the diversity and complexity of the pre-independence social fabric, serves the interests of religious nationalists. This results in the erasure of older cultures and practices. Religious nationalism cultivates a political theology that involves:

> compacting a pantheon of 330 million gods into axiomatic Hindu icons like Rama or Krishna, absorbing errant, syncretic pieties, and picturing a singular Hindu telos. Finally the project had to make this Hindu template politically indistinguishable from an 'Indian' one (Basu 2020:4).

In this paradoxical situation, religious nationalism borrows tactics and ideas from the modern West in order to assimilate minority cultures under the banner of the ancient faith.

The demolition of the Babri Masjid, a mosque in Ayodhya, and subsequent construction of the Ram Temple in its place symbolizes not only the iron hand with which minority religions are managed but also how Hinduism can be used in an effort to unite the nation. Nationalists coopt the process of "sanskritization" (Srinivas 1956:481-496)[3] in a similar way. Hebden describes this process of forming a homogenous culture:

> VHP co-opt communities and synthesise their values and culture. Co-opted Dalits build temples instead of visiting their established shrines. Temples are far more impressive structures. Slowly, loyalty is transferred to deities with Vedic names while Dalit pantheons are subsumed or made to be synonymous with Vedic Gods. Solidarity between different Dalit groups is thus replaced with loyalty to the successful dominant caste religion. This is always at the expense of the rights and culture of the Dalits who, in willingness to be represented by Hinduism fail to be represented within Hinduism (Hebden 2011:28).

The process of homogenizing cultures is carried out by the other-ing of those who do not easily fit the nationalist agenda. Religious, linguistic, and tribal minorities are required to "either accept Hindu culture and language . . . or stay in the country wholly subordinate to the Hindu nation deserving no privileges, far less preferential treatment, not even citizenship rights" (Hebden 2011:26). Given this precarious situation, religious conversion of the Dalits has to fit one of two streams in terms of political adaptation:

> [E]ither they embrace Hindutva or the Dalit Bahujan's solidarity with the Dalit movement. Just as many converts to Christianity will Chris-

3 Writing in 1952 in the context of Coorgs in South India, M. N. Srinivas observes, "A low caste was able, in a generation or two to rise to a higher position in the hierarchy by adopting vegetarianism and teetotalism, and by Sanskritizing its ritual and pantheon. In short, it took over, as far as possible, the customs, rites, and beliefs of the Brahmins, and the adoption of the Brahminis way of life by a low caste seems to have been frequent, though theoretically forbidden" (Srinivas 1952:30).

> tianise their names so some Dalits will Brahminise their names to conceal their low status. What is attracting Dalits and Adivasis to both Christianity and more compellingly to Hinduism is the politically and theologically potent monotheisms now key to both religions. Because monotheism and political centralism are alien concepts to indigenous religion Dalits struggle to find the resources to repel them (Hebden 2011:27).

This nationalist vision builds on the centralizing efforts of the Raj. Before the colonial presence, neither the idea of a nation-state nor its omnipotence was conceivable. Rather, "life was entirely organized on the local level in India. There was no such thing as the nation state and no such thing as patriotism, nationalism, or Mother India. The British, with maps, surveys and railways, reined this in" (Hebden 2011:24). This centralizing of control over the population was made possible by the detailed demographic enumeration that the British government carried out in 1881; contemporary nationalists now use the census to generate fear over the slightest variations in the proportions of religious adherents (Gill 2007:241-249). More specifically, the "enumerative policies of political representation" is seen to have directly led to the "rising prominence of what we would now call 'communalism'" (Bauman 2015:176). In this sense, the colonial political calculus continues to dominate India.

The assimilative tendencies of religious nationalism create its own cross-pressures as local gods and rituals are eclipsed by the new national creed. In short, if "Hinduism" as an epistemological category originates within the colonial framework, "Hindutva" as a political category largely continues the colonial calculus, even though it is ostensibly at cross-purposes with it.

3. Postcolonial framework and hybridized identity of converts

It is "impossible and implausible to understand the present without grappling with the deep abiding legacies of colonialism" (Dormor 2021:331). In other words, the reality of colonial imperialism lives on, embodied in new avatars. The power dynamics of religious nationalism and the adaptive mechanisms of religious minorities, therefore, can be better understood through the prism of postcolonial discourse. The concept of hybridity, initially developed in the field of postcolonial literary criticism by Homi Bhabha, has been appropriated in a wide range of fields, including cultural interpretation. Borrowed from the field of genetics, it refers to the process of crossbreeding of plant or animal species to accentuate traits that are desirable. In postcolonial studies, this idea is extended "to identify a blending of . . . racial, linguistic, literary, cultural, and religious" categories

resulting in a new breed where "entities came together in previously undefined ways to create something different, something heretofore unknown, something unexpected" (Shaw 2018:8).

Bhabha's hybridity locates the minority within a liminal space that is constantly hyphenated, occupying no clearly defined location. This is neither a betrayal of one's own identity nor a task undertaken in ignorance. The minority has to survive and hopes to thrive. Therefore, while the domination of the majority continues, the minority does not seek to confront the majority directly; rather, "by initially withholding its objective" the minority uses the "supplementary strategy,"[4] thwarting and "antagonize[ing] the implicit power to generalize, to produce the sociological solidity" (Bhabha 1994:155). This ambivalence is generally practiced where suppressed communities try to make space for themselves without offending the dominant communities. The minority communities adapt to these challenging contexts using strategies akin to the camouflage of animals. Rather than outright falsehood, it is a disguise.

Christians, in particular, have had to address the meaning of being simultaneously Indian and Christian. Given its linguistic, ethnic, and religious plurality, being Indian is itself a complex idea and might involve various hybrid permutations. Christians, likewise, have always needed to adapt to their local cultures, holding onto their essential beliefs while also being shaped by what they face from without. The accusations of foreignness or cultural betrayal that confront minorities in general and converts to Christianity in particular bring to the surface these complexities and the ambivalence of Christian identity. The accusation is double pronged. When Christians adopt the local culture, they may be accused of sneaking Christianity into the subcontinent through acculturation; when they adopt a more global culture, they are accused of Westernization. Further, the association of Christianity with the lower castes shapes the unique adaptations of converts from the upper-caste communities.

These adaptive mechanisms are exercised for multiple reasons. First, the subcontinent presents social and cultural spaces that are by default plural and cross-pollinated. It is not strange, for example, to find people visiting holy sites belonging to a variety of religions, regardless of their own religious background (see Naqvi). Likewise, festivals like Diwali, Christmas, and Eid are celebrated by all communities on the subcontinent. This creates a multicultural social matrix in which religious communities retain their particularities while sharing the prac-

4 The "supplementary strategy," Bhabha remarks, is extracted from "what British parliamentary procedure recognizes as a supplementary question," which enjoys the "advantage of carrying a sense of 'secondariness'" and therefore, as a strategy, this "adding 'to' need not 'add up' but may disturb the calculation" (Bhabha 1994:155).

tices of other religious and cultural traditions. Where communities occupy such hybridized sites, it creates fluidity in the social matrix, and a form of hybridity develops simply by virtue of sharing such socio-religious spaces over an extended period of time.

Second, a more subversive deployment of hybridity may be observed in a group referred to as "crypto-Christians." Due to the perception of danger, these Christians learn to speak not manipulatively but in "a tongue that is forked" (Bhabha 1984:126). This contrasts with the Dalit Christian who openly belong to the institutional church, aspiring to a new identity that breaks with their former one. The term "crypto-Christians" describes those who identify themselves as "Hindus in the public domain, and on official records, while privately profess faithfulness to Jesus Christ" (Dayal 2014). Even as the debate on extending the affirmative reservation benefits to Christian and Islamic converts from Dalit backgrounds continues (see Godbole 2021), "crypto-Christians" hide their identity because of the potential loss of economic privileges for which the members of the scheduled caste are otherwise eligible. Dalit conversion to Christianity, is "a matter of considerable controversy, but a scholarly consensus seems to be emerging that the impetus behind conversion was the desire for enhanced social status, for a greater sense of personal dignity, and for freedom from bondage to oppressive landlords" (Webster 2002:28). Consequently, religious conversions from Dalit background continues to be seen as a form of deception, especially by those opposed to religious conversion.

Third, another group that helps us understand hybrid adaptation is those converts from higher caste backgrounds who call themselves *Krista Bhaktas*. They tend to "retain the caste affiliations and structures that beset Hindu society" and are "indistinguishable in culture, and often in dress and food habits, from their Hindu neighbours" (Dayal 2014). As one study reveals, many of the Christ devotees from Varanasi, one of the holy cities in India, "identify themselves as Hindus either to their own community members or to outsiders, even though their belief in Christ is not clandestine" (John 2020:168).

This third group raises questions for several stakeholders: a) The state has problems gathering accurate data about religious affiliation given that the *Krista Bhaktas* embrace a dynamic dual identity and choose not to belong to the "institutional church and Christian community" (John 2020:67). The traditional method of enumerating the population into neatly compartmentalized groups, inherited from the British Raj, does not provide a framework that accounts for multiple identities. Instead, the census tends to homogenize the population, limiting the options from which to choose (Markam 2019). b) Christian leaders hesitate to accept such converts as Christians because they do not belong to the institutional

church. According to another study, "A large percentage of interviewees (read, pastors/Christian leaders) have difficulties in accepting the followers of Christ outside the church as fellow Christians, as most of them feel that one can only be a Christian if one is a member of the church" (Jeyaraj 2010:411). Therefore, the hybrid identity of the *Krista Bhaktas* affects their relationship with the Christian community. c) Since the *Krista Bhaktas* continue to belong primarily to their local communities and not to the institutionalized church, they tend to experience little resistance from local communities. Many in this group do not receive baptism, which is often associated with the institutional church and signifies a break with Hinduism, an initiation into a new identity. Instead, the *Matri Dham Ashram* (meaning, "Abode of Mother"), one of the influential Christian ashrams in Varanasi functions more "in line with the Hindu temples, the Ashram does not keep a membership roll or a visitor register" (John 2020:103).

For these reasons, the *Krista Bhakta* movement raises questions about the cultural appropriation of Christianity, especially in the context of the cross-pressures that mark social spaces on the subcontinent.

4. Conversions and Hindu-Christian identity

To address *Krista Bhakta*'s hybrid identity, one may take a cue from Balagangadhara's view that Hinduism is a culture rather than a religion. He argues that the idea of "religion" is a uniquely European Christian construct invented as "an explanatorily intelligible account of the Cosmos and itself" (Balagangadhara 1994:354). This entails that "Hinduism as a religion" is also a European formulation. If "religion has brought forth one configuration of learning; other things have brought forth other configurations of learning as well" (Balagangadhara 1994:446). He further asserts that in the Asian context, "Ritual, just like religion, brings about a culturally specific way of going-about in the world. In a configuration of learning generated by it, performative learning dominates" (Balagangadhara 1994:415).

Balagangadhara's distinction between religion and tradition can provide a legitimate way to address the possibility of a Hindu-Christian identity. If the concept of religion is marked by beliefs, especially propositionally structured beliefs, this may explain the appeal of certain churches in India that shaped their liturgical and ritual practice through close attention to both local traditions and the traditions of the church. This does not entail the absence of propositionally held beliefs but instead an emphasis on ritual practices that help Indian Christians negotiate their identity.

From this perspective, "religious conversion" is not a change of religion, since Hinduism does not prescribe a set creed. If Hinduism is a culture, then one can

be at once a Hindu and a Christ follower like Dayanand Bharati and many others who have chosen to identify themselves as "*Hindu* Christ *Bhaktas*" (Bharati 2004:xvi). Yet the term "Christian" may create unnecessary complications due to its association with Western culture. Therefore, some believers have preferred to call themselves "Hindu followers of Christ", which seems to be another way of identifying Christ-followers on the subcontinent, similar to terms like "Chinese Christians" or "Korean Christians" that incorporate believers' cultural background into their Christian identity.

Kali Charan Banerjee articulated this view in the first issue of *The Bengal Christian Herald*. "In having become Christians," he asserted, "we have not ceased to be Hindus. We are Hindu-Christians, as thoroughly Hindu as Christian. We have embraced Christianity, but we have not discarded our nationality. We are intensely national as any of our brethren of the native press can be" (Baagø 1967:67). Today, the term "Hindu-Christian" (signifying accent on the *religio*) is more aptly described as the *Hindu Krista Bhakta* (signifying accent on the *traditio*), where one retains the Hindu culture and tradition as a follower of Christ. On the one hand, this entails challenges to problematic traditions such as caste discrimination that have confronted the life of the church; on the other, it initiates a way for the gospel to refine the culture not merely through its impact on the Indian Renaissance but also through the continuing Christian engagement via education and health work.

Unlike the Ghent school's portrayal of Christianity as a religion that views Hinduism a rival (See John 2021a), the growing *Krista Bhakta* movement envisages a socio-religious identity where being a Hindu and being a Christ-follower are coterminous and converging. Raghav Krishna describes the cultural continuity observed in diet, worship, baptism, communion, and other rituals (Krishna 2007:173-177). Viewed from certain angles, such attempts at continuity risk syncretism, but the *Krista Bhaktas* believe that breaking with Hindu culture risks importing Western cultural baggage with the essential beliefs of Christianity.

The *Krista Bhaktas* establish this continuity in part by using existing cultural terms for Christian concepts, distinguishing between the *sense and reference* (originally articulated by the German philosopher Gottlob Frege (1892:25-50)) of these terms and their meanings. In other words, they adopt cultural concepts, redefining the sense to converge with an intended reference. For instance, *Krista Bhaktas* use the pre-existing local term *Muktinath* (literally meaning, "God who saves/liberates") for Jesus. *Muktinath* as the referent comes loaded with meaning, but it does not have a singular meaning and can generically and etymologically mean "God who saves". Further, the meaning of 'God saves' is redefined to refer to the nature of Christ's work that brings salvation to those who believe in Him. In this sense, the Hindu followers of Christ practice contextual appropriation by using existing terminologies

with defined meaning and clarifying their distinct Christian usage through constant articulation of the character of Jesus Christ. As Krishna argues, a *Krista Bhakta*:

> identifies himself/herself as part of the Hindu community, all festivals are celebrated with the community . . .. This is not to say that this celebration is without boundaries, however. A *Krista Bhakta* will not go against his or her convictions concerning God in matters involving things like bowing to deities, etc., and sometimes may pass on being included in certain festival activities. This is acceptable in Hindu tradition, however, as followers of certain Hindu gods refuse to bow before idols of other gods (Krishna 2007:176).

The suspicion and problematizing of *Krista Bhakta* identity within traditional Indian Christianity often betrays a non-recognition of the complexities of human identity formation, which for Christians inevitably combines socio-cultural characteristics with the act of following Christ.

5. Conclusion

The hybridized identities of the *Krista Bhaktas* suggest one way of answering what it means to be an Indian and a Christian. Yet this manner of hybridization hardly serves converts from a Dalit background. Each community responds in the manner it finds appropriate.

More importantly, the cultural continuity with the Hindu traditions that the *Krista Bhakta* movement endorses does not view Hinduism as a rival. Rather, it envisages continuity by recognizing the fulfilment of certain Hindu aspirations in the person of Jesus Christ. Further, if there are no specific creedal beliefs that essentially makes one a Hindu, then one's devotion to Christ need not exclude a Christ devotee for that reason from being *Hindu-Krista Bhakta*. This message is pivotal in the context of alienating rhetoric within Indian society that seeks to vilify religious conversions as a form of betrayal.

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