



## IMPACT OF HINDUISM, BUDDHISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM ON TRIBAL SOCIETIES – A STUDY

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### INTRODUCTION

India is the home of the followers of all the major religions of the world. This religious pluralism has added to the rich and colourful mosaic of cultural pluralism. Tribal India too, is not a monolith in terms of religion.

Though the over whelming majority of tribal population still maintains its separate existence. Its exclusive beliefs and practices, more than ninety percent of them are oriented towards Hinduism and passing through different stages of Hinduization. More than 95% of tribal populations of western India, Middle India (MadhyaPradesh), Eastern India (Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal) are Hinduized, while other Hinduized tribal populations are scattered all over the country. On a rough estimate around 5% of the tribal population are adherents of Christianity and are largely concentrated in Assam, Meghalya, Nagaland, Manipur & Mizoram. In astray pockets Christianized tribal populations are also found in Kerala, Andaman & Nicobar, Islands, Bihar, MadhyaPradesh, and Orissa. As for as Islam and Buddhism are concerned, followers of these faiths are around half a percent (0.21% to 0.89%) each of total tribal population of India. Other religious faiths hardly figure in tribal India and their followers may be there in insignificant and inconsiderable numbers. The siddi of Gujarat, Gujars of the north-western Himalayan regions Bakrewal of Jammu & Kashmir, some Bhils, Kotis and Dhankasi of Rajasthan are the examples of muslim tribes. Almost the entire tribal population of lakshdweep is muslim and this is the only place where they have any significant presence. The impact at Buddhism may be seen on the Bhots of north-west Himalaya. The Bhutias, Lepchas, Chakmas and Nagas are noticed in the north-east Himalyan region and some of the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and Ladakh.

### HINDUISM AND TRIBES

Some of the geographically isolated tribes, social organizations and cultures of almost all the tribes of India exhibit the impact of Hinduism. Establishment of British rule hastened the process of culture contact with the outside world as a consequence of increased communication. Many of the tribal areas hitherto closed were thrown open. The so called iron curtain over the tribal areas was removed. But this is also significant that, despite the adoption of many values of Hinduism. Buddhism, Islam and Christianity the distinctive Features of tribalism and tribal ethos remained.

But there may be yet another category of tribes who has been totally assimilated with the Hindu society. This is the level where a tribe has taken the form of caste. (Specially of scheduled castes) have adopted the elements of Hinduism but have retained several elements of tribal values and ethos. Here religion and magic have assimilated into each other and the forms of gotra is more totemistic than vedic.



## **BUDDHISM, ISLAM AND CHRISTIANITY**

The impact of popular Hinduism and the process of Hinduization have been so pervading over tribal India that the role of other religious ideologies and religious systems seems to be marginal. However, as the impact of Buddhism, Islam and Christianity is concerned the roles of Buddhism and Islam is seen as marginal and not very significant as compared to Christianity. Otherwise Islam and Christianity may never be very popular among the tribes because adopting either of these means severing one's ties from the past.

The tribal cultures in India can be protected, preserved and find a special and unique place in the vast sea of Indian culture only when acculturation is not imposed over them. When foreign missionaries convert them into Christians they rob them of their cultural autonomy. When Hindu organizations make them Hindus, they too, are guilty of attacking their cultural autonomy. Under these circumstances the assimilation of the tribal people take a political shape in the interest of national unity. The tribal people should be left alone to decide their fate and future so that they can achieve, if they like a culture million in consonance of their requirements by way of mingling of Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and tribalism.

Buddhism in India began with the life of Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 563-483 B.C.), a prince from the small Shakya Kingdom located in the foothills of the Himalayas in Nepal. Brought up in luxury, the prince abandoned his home and wandered forth as a religious beggar, searching for the meaning of existence.

By the third century B.C., the still-young religion based on the Buddha's teachings was being spread throughout South Asia through the agency of the Mauryan Empire (ca. 326-184 B.C.; see *The Mauryan Empire*, ch. 1). By the seventh century A.D., having spread throughout East Asia and Southeast Asia, Buddhism probably had the largest religious following in the world.

For centuries Indian royalty and merchants patronized Buddhist monasteries and raised beautiful, hemispherical stone structures called stupas over the relics of the Buddha in reverence to his memory. Since the 1840s, archaeology has revealed the huge impact of Buddhist art, iconography, and architecture in India. The monastery complex at Nalanda in Bihar, in ruins in 1993, was a world center for Buddhist philosophy and religion until the thirteenth century. But by the thirteenth century, when Turkic invaders destroyed the remaining monasteries on the plains, Buddhism as an organized religion had practically disappeared from India. It survived only in Bhutan and Sikkim, both of which were then independent Himalayan kingdoms; among tribal groups in the mountains of northeast India; and in Sri Lanka. The reasons for this disappearance are unclear, and they are many: shifts in royal patronage from Buddhist to Hindu religious institutions; a constant intellectual struggle with dynamic Hindu intellectual schools, which eventually triumphed; and slow adoption of popular religious forms by Buddhists while Hindu monastic communities grew up with the same style of discipline as the Buddhists, leading to the slow but steady amalgamation of ideas and trends in the two religions. Buddhism began a steady and dramatic comeback in India during the early twentieth century, spurred on originally by a combination of European antiquarian and philosophical interest and the dedicated activities of a few Indian devotees. The foundation of the Mahabodhi Society (Society of Great Enlightenment) in 1891,

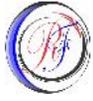


originally as a force to wrest control of the Buddhist shrine at Gaya from the hands of Hindu managers, gave a large stimulus to the popularization of Buddhist philosophy and the importance of the religion in India's past. A major breakthrough occurred in 1956 after some thirty years of Untouchable, or Dalit (see Glossary), agitation when Bhimrao Ramji (B.R.) Ambedkar, leader of the untouchable wing within the Congress (see Glossary), announced that he was converting to Buddhism as a way to escape from the impediments of the Hindu caste system (see Varna, Caste, and Other Divisions, ch. 5). He brought with him masses of Untouchables--also known as Harijans (see Glossary) or Dalits--and members of Scheduled Castes (see Glossary), who mostly came from Maharashtra and border areas of neighboring states and from the Agra area in Uttar Pradesh. By the early 1990s, there were more than 5 million Buddhists in Maharashtra, or 79 percent of the entire Buddhist community in India, almost all recent converts from low castes. When added to long time Buddhist populations in hill areas of northeast India (West Bengal, Assam, Sikkim, Mizoram, and Tripura) and high Himalayan valleys (Ladakh District in Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and northern Uttar Pradesh), and to the influx of Tibetan Buddhist refugees who fled from Tibet with the Dalai Lama in 1959 and thereafter, the recent converts raised the number of Buddhists in India to 6.4 million by 1991. This was a 35.9 percent increase since 1981 and made Buddhism the fifth largest religious group in the country. The forms of Buddhism practiced by Himalayan communities and Tibetan refugees are part of the Vajrayana, or "Way of the Lightning Bolt," that developed after the seventh century A.D. as part of Mahayana (Great Path) Buddhism. Although retaining the fundamental importance of individual spiritual advancement, the Vajrayana stresses the intercession of bodhisattvas, or enlightened beings, who remain in this world to aid others on the path. Until the twentieth century, the Himalayan kingdoms supported a hierarchy in which Buddhist monks, some identified from birth as bodhisattvas, occupied the highest positions in society.

### **Buddhism in India**

Most other Buddhists in India follow Theravada Buddhism, the "Doctrine of the Elders," which traces its origin through Sri Lankan and Burmese traditions to scriptures in the Pali language, a Sanskritic dialect in eastern India. Although replete with miraculous events and legends, these scriptures stress a more human Buddha and a democratic path toward enlightenment for everyone. Ambedkar's plan for the expanding Buddhist congregation in India visualized Buddhist monks and nuns developing themselves through service to others. Convert communities, by embracing Buddhism, have embarked on social transformations, including a decline in alcoholism, a simplification of marriage ceremonies and abolition of ruinous marriage expenses, a greater emphasis on education, and a heightened sense of identity and self-worth.

A number of avowedly Hindu monastic communities have grown up over time and adopted some of the characteristics associated with early Buddhism and Jainism, while remaining dedicated to the Hindu philosophical traditions. One of the oldest and most respected of the Hindu orders traces its origin to the teacher Shankara (788-820), believed by many devotees to have lived hundreds of years earlier. Shankara's philosophy is a primary source of Vedanta, or the "End of the Veda," the final commentary on revealed truth, which is one of the most influential trends in modern Hinduism. His interpretation of the Upanishads



portrays brahman as absolutely one and without qualities. The phenomenal world is illusion (maya), which the embodied soul must transcend in order to achieve oneness with brahman. As a wandering monk, Shankara traveled throughout India, combating Buddhist atheism and founding five seats of learning at Badrinath (Uttar Pradesh), Dwaraka (Gujarat), Puri (Orissa), Sringeri (Karnataka), and Kanchipuram (Tamil Nadu). In the 1990s, those seats are still held by successors to Shankara's philosophy (Shankara Acharyas), who head an order of orange-clad monks that is highly respected by the Hindu community throughout India. Activities of the acharyas, including their periodic trips away from their home monasteries to visit and preach to devotees, receive exposure in regional and national media. Their conservative viewpoints and pronouncements on a variety of topics, although not binding on most believers, attract considerable public attention.

**AN important fact to be noted here is that perhaps no tribal community has adopted a new faith in toto. In every such tribe the converted and the non –converted members live together. If we take up the case of Arunachal Pradesh we find that the tribal population can be divided into Buddhists and those who continue to abide by their beliefs in spirits. The tribes of western Arunachal Pradesh inhabiting the high hills of kamang and subansiri and siang districts are the followers of Mahayana or Tibetan Buddhism.**

## CONCLUSION

In brief there is a great impact of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam upon Tribal society in India. Each community has its own special impact upon Tribal community which reflects throughout India.

## REFERENCE

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