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HISTORY OF CONVERSION FROM INDIAN DALIT

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ABSTRACT

South and west were home to Christian traditions early on: the Syrian Christians of Kerala trace their origin to 1 A.D. and historians agree that there was a Christian community in Kerala at this time. Though these Christians maintained links with Chaldea or Persia, the community remained relatively isolated from Western Christianity at least until the sixteenth century - Keralam Christianity was linked to west Asia, not Western Europe. Next came Catholic influence, with Catholicism in Goa being four hundred years old. It was only at the end of the eighteenth century, however, that the north witnessed a significant growth in Christian missionary activities, although a few efforts predated that period and there were small groups of converts here and there. The mid-eighteenth century conversions to Catholicism in Bettiah, where the local ruler patronised the mission, is an interesting case (Sahay, 1986). In the northeast, where Protestantism dominates, Christianity is largely the product of nineteenth and twentieth century conversions. Thus while Christianity is often associated with British rule and the process of westernisation, it is clear from the discussion above that its appearance in India preceded the British by several hundred years. Indeed, one might say that Christianity in India is as old as the faith itself. Clearly Christianity has come to India from different parts of the world, at different historical moments and out of different impulses. It is crucial to 5 Christian Communities of India: A Social and Historical Overview Rowena Robinson differentiate between the British and pre-British periods and within both of these there are further distinctions – these are outlined above and will be discussed in slightly more detail below. As noted, the earliest known Christian community is that of the Syrian Christians.

HISTORY OF CONVERSION:-

The Syrian or Thomas Christians regard themselves as the descendants of high caste (Nambudiri Brahman) converts of St Thomas. While the St. Thomas tradition is part of

Syrian Christian lore, it elides with another Thomas tradition, that of the merchant Thomas of Cana, who is said to have come to the Malabar coast in A.D.345 with a number of Christians from Jerusalem, Baghdad and Nineveh. There appears to have been mercantile and spiritual integration between the indigenous and immigrant peoples, though they remained separate endogamous groups. The Syrian Christians have a long history of prestige and privilege, enjoyed under different local rulers.

The Syrians have been linked with maritime trade and commerce for centuries. They also have a history of warrior service and clientage under the region's chiefs. It is through their warrior and mercantile skills and tradition of rendering service as pepper brokers and revenue officers in the Malabar, for which they received honour and social privileges from the regional rulers, that the patrilineal, prosperous Syrians established themselves as a high status group within the indigenous hierarchy (Bayly 1989). They negotiated their position through alliances with the local rulers and maintained their status by adhering strictly to the purity-pollution codes of regional Hindu society. India's next major encounter with Christianity came in the sixteenth century. At that time, the Portuguese came to India bearing Catholicism. Trade, conquest and Christianisation went hand in hand for them: the sword accompanied the cross in the search for spices. Goa, of which the Portuguese first gained control in 1510, formed the Asian centre of their overseas activities. The Portuguese viewed their empire as a commercial and maritime enterprise cast in a military and ecclesiastical mould (Boxer 1969). Religion and trade were indistinguishable. The king was aligned with the Papacy in what was termed the Padroado form of jurisdiction (Ram 1991). A series of Papal Bulls passed between 1452 and 1456 gave Portugal the authority to conquer, subdue and convert all pagan territories. 6 Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and Religions and Development Research Programme Working Paper Series, Volume I, Number 01 To control the Asian trade routes, the Portuguese needed certain key posts. Goa was one of the main ones, where political and military rule was established, but there were smaller trading bases along the southern coastal belt. To establish themselves in these areas, the Portuguese required the support of the local people. Since they defined themselves in religious terms, their mode of incorporating local populations into their political body involved converting them to the Catholic religion. Mass conversions were linked to the need to create social allies. Thus conversions took place between 1527 and 1549 among castes with fishing and boat-handling skills, such as the Mukkuvars and the Paravas along the southern coast, where trade and proselytisation were carried on under the shelter of the forts. For both these groups, Christianity became a means of strengthening their jati or community identity. The Paravas also had a grip on the profitable pearl fishing industry. Unlike the Mukkuvars, therefore, who even today have a precarious material existence, the Paravas developed considerably in terms of their economic strength and occupational diversification (Ram 1991). In Goa the interlocking of religion and politics, of the state and the church, was uniquely manifest. The state actively espoused mission, successive viceroys reporting to the king on the progress of

conversion efforts. The missionaries were able to access state forces to destroy temples, quell resistance to conversion and punish the defiant. Hemmed in by such compulsions, few options were available to the people. Fleeing from the territory or resisting with violence were among the more drastic responses chosen by some. The majority perhaps accepted conversion out of different motives. For the upper castes, conversion meant alignment with the rulers and hence the protection of their economic and social privileges. For the low-ranking, there may have been an expectation of social mobility, for instance, through movement into non-traditional, pollution-neutral occupations opened up by the new administration. In many cases, though, it is likely that things worked differently: existing patron-client relations were employed to bring about conversion. Village leaders were converted and they in turn influenced the other caste groups bound to them by ties of socio-economic dependence. Mass conversions perpetuated caste and, whatever the expectations of lower social groups, the church did not attempt to radically alter existing hierarchies. Indeed, conversion protected the privileges of the upper caste landed groups.

In these instances, caste 7 Christian Communities of India: A Social and Historical Overview Rowena Robinson came to be largely dissociated from notions of purity and pollution, but remained an idiom of social differentiation, marking status distinctions and the deference patterns with which they were associated. Proselytisation did not remain altogether confined to the coast in the centuries after the Portuguese came to India. Incursions into the interior were made by Jesuits and other missionary orders. Conversions were made in inner Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, and in Bombay, Daman and Diu. In addition, there were three successive waves of Catholic converts from north Goa, who fled to Mangalore and areas nearby, due to the Inquisition, famine and political upheavals. Individual conversions were fewer in this period. By far the most intriguing effort to bring about individual conversions was made – again in Tamil Nadu – by a Jesuit, who separated himself from the strivings of the Padroado. Based in Madurai, the Italian Robert Nobili explicitly attempted to enter into dialogue with Brahmanical Hinduism. As noted above, the Padroado had, in contrast, linked itself with south India's low-ranking maritime communities. Nobili adopted the attire, diet and lifestyle of a Brahman sannyasi (renunciate). He studied Tamil and Sanskrit sacred scriptures and entered into discussions with Madurai's priests (Bayly 1989; Neill 1984). Nobili's converts were high caste men.

They wore the sacred thread and received the sacraments from select priests who, like their leader, maintained a Brahmanical lifestyle and called themselves sannyasis (Bayly 1989). From the viewpoint of the converts, receiving baptism was akin to being initiated by a guru. They did not associate with lower-caste Christians and, for them, Catholicism denoted membership of a particular kind of sect, which forbade their taking part in idolatrous rites but allowed them to live with their families and retain their caste ideas and symbols. The British period did not see the kind of relatively unambiguous bond between religion and power that

characterised the Estado da India, the areas under Portugal's imperial control. The linkages between missionary activity and British colonialism were complex and intricate. The English East India Company, though it employed chaplains for its own servants, merchants and soldiers, was at first hostile to missionary activity. This hostility stemmed from the fact that, as a commercial enterprise, the Company could only hope to succeed by accommodation to indigenous social and cultural traditions, including religion. It feared that brash 8 Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and Religions and Development Research Programme Working Paper Series, Volume I, Number 01 evangelical efforts might give rise to violent reactions, creating political instability and threatening vital commercial interests. A change came about in the early nineteenth century after pressure was put on the British government by missionaries and returned civil servants such as Charles Grant, who argued that the propagation of Christianity, far from endangering British interests in India, would produce obedient citizens and strengthen the foundations of the empire. The motifs of civilization and moral improvement that were woven into the missionary enterprise thus potentially facilitated the forging of linkages with the project of colonialism. The Company had itself not followed its espoused practice of complete neutrality in religious affairs. Accommodation to indigenous religion meant that large sums of money were donated for the maintenance of temples and priests and Company officials attended the more important sacred celebrations, with a view to manifesting their respect for native traditions. It was partly this participation by Company servants in Hindu rituals that provoked the missionaries to complain to the government. Following a shift of policy, the Charter Act of 1813 directed that missionary efforts be permitted, if not actively supported. A cautious attitude towards the missionaries resulted. In the decades that followed, their work began to be viewed with increasing favour, though at no point was a missionary-cumimperialist drift completely dominant (Kooiman 1989).

In the case of conversions in the tribal areas of central, east and northeast India, however, there is clear evidence of official patronage of the missionaries. Conversion in the northeast had begun to advance while the British were in the process of shedding the role of traders to assume that of rulers. Annexation brought the British into contact with the tribal people of the hilly regions, who they considered unpredictable, primitive and difficult to deal with. It was hoped that missionaries, through evangelisation and education, would be able to civilize and domesticate the unmanageable tribes in a terrain hard to administer and govern directly. Among the missionaries who worked in the northeast, the Presbyterians and Baptists were prominent, though Methodists, Catholics and Anglicans were also present. The government took an interest in the educational activities of the missionaries and funds were donated for this purpose, particularly in 9 Christian Communities of India: A Social and Historical Overview Rowena Robinson the latter half of the nineteenth-century. Churches were also built with vice-regal support and support from the administration and local converts. Apart from the mass conversions of Untouchables in certain parts of the country, the bulk of the

converts made during the British period were located in more outlying regions, at the margins of the agrarian plains, for example, in particular north-eastern tribal pockets. It is suggested that the conversion of tribal groups such as the Nagas may be explained, in part at least, as a function of social transformation. Isolated as they were both geographically and in terms of religion from traditions with a wider literary base, such as Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism, these groups retained elaborate but highly parochial belief systems. The opening up of the hills under the British brought about various material and economic changes, integrated the hitherto insulated Nagas with the rest of the subcontinent and led also to an erosion of traditional village institutions and forms of authority. These rapid shifts and the broadening horizons of their social world required something other than the existing localised belief systems, which had, in any case, been greatly dislocated by the changes taking place. Thus, entire groups caught in a fluctuating social, cultural and political environment became amenable to conversion (Eaton 1984). Mass conversions, from the middle of the nineteenth-century onwards, took place largely among low caste groups. In the north, Chamars (leather workers), Chuhras and Lal Begis (sweeper communities) in the Punjab and the United Provinces were drawn into such movements. Conversion in each of these cases was a result of a group decision and generally followed kinship lines (Webster 1976). In the south, the mid-nineteenth century saw a mass conversion movement among the Nadars, a caste located on the borders of the boundary of pollution. In Telugu country, groups of Malas and Madigas converted en masse (Forrester 1980). Mass movements indicated a growing discontent among the depressed classes, which may be related to the extensive disruptive effects of colonial rule in rural India. A dual effect resulted. The traditional relations of production and distribution were undermined, rendering the lowest castes more vulnerable. At the same time, there were new opportunities for such groups to enhance their social position or acquire new patrons or religious attachments.

CONCLUSION:-

Third, during such an engagement, the insights that already exist among the struggling people could be identified, which would help Dalit Theology to enlarge its ideas, potential and scope as a Practical theology of liberation.I would also like to admit and state that the topic of this research is ‘Towards a practical Dalit Theology’ and therefore it is a journey or a process for making Dalit Theology a more functioning Practical theology. As a result, my findings may not necessarily be fully comprehensive, nor is my recommendation the only viable method to enlarge Dalit Theology as a Practical theology or to address the issue of caste oppression. Therefore, I feel that if this research enthuses and encourages future researchers, both men and women, to venture into furthering this attempt, it would represent its greatest success. After all, caste has to be challenged and society needs to be transformed for all to live in equality, justice and peace, which is the will of God. This research is a small attempt towards that goal by enlarging Dalit Theology as a Practical theology.

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