Implications of the Involvement of a Minority Group in People's Struggles: The Case of India

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Though Christians are in a minority in India, they are prominent in action groups that are involved in the organisation of the unorganised groups that are ignored by others, including leftist political parties. They have their origin in the late 1960s and once again in the late 1970s, when there was serious questioning of the present pattern of development as well as of the political system. Socio-economic analysis indicated that the weaker sections were being continuously marginalised by the present development pattern and that the upper classes were getting its benefits. The youth, particularly university students who were exposed to the radical thinking of this decade, were disillusioned not merely with the development pattern, but also with the political parties including those of the left, since they felt that the parties were using the weaker sections as 'vote banks' but would not work for their empowerment. The students were convinced that the social system that is against the poor could not be changed without organising the marginalised sections.

Because of higher literacy, a relatively larger proportion of these activists were Christians (Fernandes 1983). However, there is one crucial difference between the Latin American experience and the Indian situation. In fact except for the Philippines the latter may be more or less representative of most Asian countries. In these countries, Christians are in a minority while in Latin America and the Philippines Catholicism is the dominant religion. As such, Churches in Asian countries cannot have the same impact as they have had in Latin America. Together with that, one should bear in mind religious revivalism among Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and to a great extent also among Christians. This revivalism itself cannot be considered primarily a religious phenomenon but a political and economic need of the dominant classes. Several studies have shown that communalism is in fact a way the dominant classes that are competing with each other using religion to maintain or acquire political and economic hold over the masses. An emotional issue like religion is used by them to get cooperation of the people in this struggle for political leadership and economic domination (Ahmad 1983).

Rightist reaction

Such revivalism has taken several forms in India and in other Asian countries. The victory of the rightist religious forces in Muslim countries, the struggle in Punjab and the extreme Hindu reaction, the ongoing struggle in Lebanon are among examples of religion being used as a tool in a political or economic struggle. Among Hindus it has taken the form of the Rashtra Swayam Savak Sangh (RSS), the Virat Hindu Parishad (VHP) or the Viswa Hindu Samelan (World Hindu Convention).
Many of these are reactions to conversion movements by missionaries or to colonialism. But some recent religious movements are primarily dominant reaction to a people's movement. When, for example, the tribals rose in revolt against forest contractors, moneylenders and officials who were exploiting them, the newspapers stated 'Tribals are in revolt in the Chattisgarh region of Madhya Pradesh. Over 90 per cent of these tribals are Christians'.

Briefly, the context of peoples movements the dominant sections that feel threatened try to divide the oppressed on an emotional issue to prevent them from organising themselves. These cases are found all over the country. This, for example, was the reaction of the moneylenders to Gram Vikas in Orissa that helped the tribals to free themselves from the clutches of the moneylenders who kept them in bondage. Since several members of Gram Vikas were Christians, the moneylenders spread the rumour among the tribals that it was in fact a missionary organisation that used the struggle against moneylenders to convert the tribals to Christianity (Madiath 1980).

Apart from making propaganda at the local level and divide the oppressed, also the national organs of these reactionary groups use religion at the macro-level to make propaganda against those involved in people's movements. The Monthly Review of RSS, Manthan, for example, has written several articles to say that liberation theology is in fact just one more tool in the hands of Christians to convert the poor to Christianity. They have quoted several statements of Catholics as well as Protestants cut of context to show that the development efforts of the Churches as well as people's movements in which Christians are prominent are in fact part of an international conspiracy to turn the whole of India Christian.

The Marxist reaction

What is clear is that the dominant sections react by raising an emotional issue when their political and economic domination is threatened. The opposite is true about the form that the reaction of the Marxist parties takes but the basic approach seems to be similar.

To understand this one should bear in mind that the Communist parties in India have evolved for the last three decades from a revolutionary outfit that attempted to win power through an armed struggle to political parties that depend on democratic elections for success in the central parliament or in the state legislatures. Votes are won by keeping control over the 'vote banks', i.e. groups that do not have sufficient political consciousness but are attracted to a party because it apparently protects their interests. Often these actions of political parties stop at populist actions that do not have any long term impact, but they do not encourage any movement that makes the people independent.

Action groups and people's movements started in the late 1960s, both because there was questioning of the present development