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Re-reading Tribal and Dalit Conversion Movements: The Case of the Malayarayans and Pulayas of Kerala

by George Oommen

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SUMMARY

In the nineteenth century, the Indian “Tribals”, such as the Malayarayans and Pulayas of Kerala, were called upon to face radical change. Issues related to preservation of their identity and space on the one hand, and dealing with the new world-view on the other, were vital to their sustained and meaningful continuance.

Studies on Christian conversion movements in India have produced some excellent monographs and articles. However, almost all these emphasise the sociological aspects of conversion and largely ignore religious (belief) dimensions.¹

Re-reading of the dalit and tribal mass movements needs to recapture pre-existing belief which intermingled with Christian ideas. Historians cannot presume a smooth transition when dalits and tribals left behind time-honoured world-views, and embraced a new faith.

Theories on the role of ideas in African conversions advanced by a well-known anthropologist, Robin Horton, may be of some interest in this discussion.²

According to Horton, pre-existent world-views played a vital role in African conversion. Africans, who were living in a period of rapid social change gradually came to feel that their traditional world-view was no longer adequate as a method of "explanation, prediction and control." They were, therefore, predisposed towards evolving or devising a more satisfactory cosmology, and this they discovered in Islam and Christianity-options present in the African situation. Though experienced as increasingly inadequate, traditional cosmology nevertheless continued to play a part in the conversion process. For Horton, the African cosmology has a two-tier structure: lesser spirits concerned with events in the microcosm and the Supreme Being concerned with events in the macrocosm. As social relationships and boundaries are redefined due to social change, less attention is paid to lesser spirits, and the Supreme Being takes over as dominant reality which helps the converts to understand, predict and control events.

Horton's theory lays stress on pre-conversion cosmology and the intellectual and emotional process involved in any conversion. His argument is a timely reminder that scholars should not only be aware of the dangers regarding conversion as a purely social phenomenon, but should also take into account the possibility that, in certain circumstances, cosmology facilitates the process.

Malayarayans

Malayarayan tribal people were known by several names such as Mulla Vellens, Mulla Nairs, Hill Arrians and Malayarayans. While *Hill Arrian* was used by all Anglican sources, the Government of Travancore and ethnographers like Thurston used the name Malayarayan which means the Arayan of the hills to distinguish them from the fishing community on the Kerala coasts, the Arayans.

Malayarayans lived in the interiors of Western Ghats which form the Eastern border of Kerala state. Malayarayan territories belonged to Poonjar or Puniyat Rajas (descendants of Manuikrama Kulasekhara Perumal) who became vassals of Travancore kings during the conquest of Marthanda Varma in 1749-50.

Ethnographic descriptions and anthropological observations of the 19th century highlighted the fact that Malayarayans were different from other hill tribes of

Travancore on many counts.³ The Travancore Census Report (1901) describes Malayarayangans as "a class of hill tribes, who are little more civilised than the Mannans, and have fixed abodes in the slopes of high mountain ranges. Their villages are fine-looking, with trees and palms all around. They are superior in appearance to most other hill tribes, but are generally short in stature. Some of the Arayangans are rich, and own large plots of cultivated grounds. They seldom work for hire, or carry loads."⁴

Stretches of land were cultivated with paddy, rice and fruit trees indicating a self-sufficient Malayarayan economy. Although they lived in comparative isolation, a part of farm and other forest produce like wax, honey and dried meat of animals was marketed for cash through Muslim traders.⁵ Many of their houses were good substantial erections of wood and stone," although a majority preferred to live in temporary huts of mud and bamboos as the "survivors often dislike living in a dwelling in which the head of the family has died."⁶

This Malayalam speaking tribe had definite position in the Travancore social hierarchy and were "considered to rank in caste above all mechanics, and equal to Muhamadans and Jews." Sudras did not perceive pollution while in contact with Malayarayangans.⁷ Significantly they themselves claimed superiority over other tribes by "styling themselves as Karingal Brahmins."⁸

Despite their comparative economic independence, the reality of socio-economic exploitation threatened them. This was mainly due to the fact that Malayarayangans cultivated lands traditionally owned by Brahmin zamindars. Rent and taxes levied on them were heavy. They were forced to pay not only head tax (*Thalakram*) but also breast tax (*Mulakaram*). Brahmins and their Nair supervisors, although living far away from the territory of Malayarayan tribes received, "trifling rents from the Arriangans for their fruit-trees and cultivated land, and besides this, each headman had to furnish a certain quantity of honey for the raja's birthday, dig a few elephant pits, and help, with bark ropes, to conduct the animals, when trapped, into the taming cages."⁹ Thus Malayarayangans were victims of external exploitation and oppression.

Pre-existing Belief System

An effort of reconstructing the pre-existing belief system of Malayarayangans takes the historian to the issue of the source itself. Ethnographers, social commentators and anthropologists who had commented on the Malayarayan religion of the 19th century

were all heavily, in some cases entirely, dependant on missionary observations about the phenomenon.¹⁰ The natural and the dominant interest of missionaries' narration was drawing a dark picture of the primitive tribal religion. According to them, Malayarayans were prepared to embrace the "true" and superior religion in Christianity. However, a redeeming feature of the descriptions is that missionaries such as H. Baker, Jr., and A. F. Painter, who were acquainted with the people and local language for several decades, had also an anthropological approach which makes a difference.

The missionary reports on Malayarayan beliefs and practices bring out the following salient points:

Primordality

The belief system was of a world of spirits permeating all existence. Life and living, substance and surroundings were solely dependent upon the benevolence or malevolence of spirits. Missionary descriptions speak of "worship" of spirits and devils, "demolatory," "devil-dancing," etc.¹¹ Whether worship or propitiation, it is evident that Malayarayans were seeking to control the ill-effects of spirits' disfavour or preventing these spirits from taking complete control of their life.¹² Access to powerful spirits was the key to the world of the supernatural.

Ravines, rocks, groves and hills held spirits and demons which wielded sway and awe over families or villages. "The religious services rendered to these are intended to deprecate anger rather than to seek benefits: but in no case is lust to be gratified, or wickedness practised, as pleasing to these deities," observed Baker, Jr.¹³ Each village or hill had "devil-priests" and their role was significant in controlling or containing the impact of spirits. Small huts or "shrines" and sacred stones were considered as dwelling places of demons or genii. Baker, Jr., wrote in the 1850s "(We) went over rocks and ravines to some spots where the genii were supposed to reside. At one place there was a fragment of granite well oiled, and surrounded by a great number of extinguished torches: This easily broke into fragments. Another stone I found difficult to move" ...¹⁴

Ancestral spirits had a prominent role in the belief system. Many ancient *tumuli* and graves of chiefs were evident in the hills. Fragments of pottery, brass figures, iron weapons, obviously remains of offerings made, were present near these places.

Arrack and sweetmeats were offered to the departed spirits. Lamps were lit at the graves of ancestors. Miniature cromlechs of small stone slabs marked the grave with a granite piece to represent the deceased. "To this day," Mateer observed,

"the Arayans make similar little cells of pieces of stone, the whole forming a box of few inches square; and on the death of a member of any family, the spirit is supposed to pass, as the body is being buried, into a brass or silver image, which is shut into this vault; if the parties are very poor, an oblong smooth stone suffices. A few offerings of milk, rice, toddy and ghee are made, a torch lighted and extinguished, the figure placed inside the cell and the covering stone hastily placed on; then all leave ... the spirit is thus supposed to be enclosed; no one ventures to touch the cell at any other time."¹⁵

The spirits of the ones who had violent deaths were believed to have special powers over the living ones.

The welfare of the individual and the community, prosperity and growth, peril and calamity, disease and progress were all integrally related to the spirits of the deceased. Ancestor "worship" and its principles kept up the social relations of the living world. They were more concerned about the ancestors within the reach of memory and, as time went on, new spirits were incorporated in the circle of worship. The living and the dead were held in one unit, sources of life and moral action. There was also a blend of affection and abuse of spirits held together in delicate balance.

Disease and epidemics particularly were seen as caused by spirits. "Devil-dancers" conducted ceremonies to appease them so that they could divert or prevent disasters. However, Malayarayans believed that spirits befriended certain people and they could possess supernatural powers and formulae for cure. Thus village devil-priests had great influence in Malayarayan society.

Inter-relatedness

The second, probably the most significant, feature of Malayarayan religion was that, many aspects of existence, agricultural activities, physical health, social well-being were blended with it. Nature and spirit, for instance, were not external to each other. As a result, religion and culture, society and ecology were held in unity. For example, they construed natural calamities as an expression of wrath of their ancestral spirits if they changed religion. In the same way environmental changes impacted upon

their own world-view. Thus they thought about the failure of certain gods and decreasing control of certain spirits over occurrences.

Consequence to such an inter-related view of natural and supernatural, and social and religious spheres, any change in one area affected the other. As we shall see later, socio-political changes of the mid-nineteenth century appears to have affected their traditional attitude to pre-existing agencies of control. It may be that they were striving for more accessibility to newer ways of dealing with the changes and crises.

Sanskritization

Malayarayan belief system, although filled with primeval concepts, did not have a static nature. In fact one of the features that came across during the mid-nineteenth century was the dynamic nature of their system of belief. Very evidently, Malayarayans were gradually assimilating some Sanskritic gods and goddesses such as *Kali* and *Ayyappan*. Definitely they were not regular features of their activity.¹⁶ New situations seem to make them to resort to effective ways of dealing with it. This is what Baker, Jr., observes about the place of Sanskritic gods and ceremonies in their pre-existing primeval system:

It has been observed, that in cases of sickness sometimes Arrians will make offerings to a Hindu god, and that they attend the great feasts occasionally; but in no case do they believe that they are under any obligation to do so, their own spirits being considered fully equal to Siva, or his fellow god, Krishna, the chief ...¹⁷

It is amply clear that Malayarayan religious ideas were not part of a secluded or static system. It was a system with potential to assimilate and to appropriate.

Continuity and Change

Malayarayans, geographically and socially secluded from the outside world, were not altogether free from outside influence as we have already seen. They were caught up in a web of exploitation by traders and rent collectors. However, it is clear from the missionary reports that except occasionally, they did not venture out of traditional territorial confines. Baker, Jr., during his first visit to them in 1849 reported that they had never seen a European, except surveyors who visited them several decades back.¹⁸ But during the mid-nineteenth century several traumatic changes seem to

have affected them. These changes were a result of Travancore Government's introduction of a modernising process.

Large stretches of land from the habitat of the Malayarayans were leased out to several European planters. This introduced in its train a host of other changes and crises in the life of Malayarayan tribes. Now that the land was open to outsiders the number of external interferences were rapidly increasing during the second half of the 19th century. Tamil merchants were moving through their territory. Travancore postal carriers passed through it daily.¹⁹ Large contracts for timber introduced wages, employment. The introduction of cash economy "had tended much to a craving after wealth, and neglect of other duties," among the converts, Baker, Jr., complained.²⁰

The most obvious intrusion in their territory happened as a result of the opening up of the Kottayam-Madura Road. This road not only cut through the heart of Malayarayan land but brought a stream of planters, coolies and merchants. Mundakkayam, where Baker, Jr., started the work among them in 1848, was one of the first to be affected by this road. "This village is no longer the isolated spot it once was, the European planters having settled on the Peru Merde, a range of hills east of Mundakkayam, and there being in consequence the passing and repassing of many coolies and Government officials of various castes," wrote Baker, Jr., about the dramatic changes.²¹

Another most painful effect of changes were the terrible epidemics of cholera and fever. In 1860 the breakout of cholera in Mundakkayam alone wiped out many.

Encounter with Christianity

A chance meeting that took place between a group of Malayarayans and Baker, Jr., during one of his tours was what made Malayarayans to consider conversion to Christianity. After the first meeting, Malayarayan leaders met Baker five times requesting him to start work among them. However, Baker was unable to start work among them. Their persistence in the end paid off. He commenced the missionary work among them in 1848. This is how Baker, Jr., reported about the fifth visit of Malayarayans which moved him at last:

At length, 'the heads' of several 'villages' appeared at Pallam and remonstrated on account of my delay. "Five times," said they, "have we been to call you. You

must know we know nothing right. Will you teach us, or not? We die like beasts and are buried like dogs! Ought you to neglect us?" "Cholera and fever," said another, "carried off such and such members of my family. Where are they now?" They stated that they wanted no pecuniary help, as they had plenty of rice. They wished to serve God and not to be oppressed by anyone. They offered to make over their lands as a proof of their sincerity, and waited about, determined to have me in their hills.²²

Mid-nineteenth century changes and the crises those changes brought in seem to have affected their traditional systems of control. It appears that they were trying an entirely new and outside system to deal with dramatic consequences of change and failure of their traditional sources of power. In fact what strikes us in the conversation of headmen with Baker, Jr., is their request for (1) access to education, and (2) control of diseases. Missionary reports give several pieces of evidence for the fact that it was these two aspects which Malayarayans stressed in every instance when Christian work started in their villages. Missionaries' new religious devices, Bible, baptism etc., were perceived by some of the Malayarayans as powerful guarantee against evil spirits. Epidemics particularly were occasions of large scale conversion to Christianity.

Content of Missionary Preaching

The missionaries' preaching concentrated on several aspects; access to the powerful Book (The Bible), Christianity as a way to Heaven, the love of God, the need to give up the worship of Satan, the need to remove all symbols of 'devil-worship,' etc. In many cases Malayarayans were ready to be baptised as soon as the missionaries preached, indicating that either they were already prepared for a radical move or they were in contact with Christian relatives in other villages. Baker reports about the response to one of his six-day preaching tour: "The men of four villages wished at once to cut off their top-knots, and asked for baptism forthwith ... I said that faith and patience were the life of Christ's people, and that a profession of this nature could not be put on and off like clothing: they had better wait; ... But they said, 'You must destroy our devil-places, and teach us to pray to our Father, as you call Him, in Heaven, or some beginning must be made.'"²³ It is evident that Malayarayans were determined to make the move, come what may, and try the new sources of power. It was in the face of severe opposition and systematic persecution unleashed by the Raja's people that they were sharing this determination to affiliate themselves to Christianity.

What is the explanation for Malayarayan's favourable response to missionary preaching? For finding an answer to this we may have to find the meaning behind the 'language' of the Malayarayans. We may have to make out how they have chosen to understand the message of missionaries. In fact, I would like to conclude that an analysis of the content of the missionary preaching may not give us very many clues to what Malayarayans chose to understand during conversion. The question that they raised during the dialogue with missionaries may give us more clues to the interaction of ideas that were taking place.

Questions Asked

Numerous questions raised by Malayarayans after missionary preachings clearly demonstrated that pre-existing theological categories, patterns of thinking related to spirits were not that easy to be removed from their minds. The continued influence of spirits and old gods, and the calamities that may occur were all vital issues for them. From Mankompu, an important Malayarayan conversion centre in the 1880s, Painter gave the following report about the intellectual struggle of the new converts:

How we recall the struggle so manifestly going on in their minds as one after another spoke; their great fear of the Poonyatt Rajah, that he might curse them and turn them from the lands on which their ancestors had lived for centuries; their fear of the wrath of the demons; their hesitation to forsake what they and their ancestors had held sacred for centuries. On every side were the signs of their worship; the little shrines and sacred stones where the demons were supposed to dwell; the little temple where was a black granite image of the Hindu goddess *Kali* with the ruby eyes, which they greatly feared, and before which they made offerings in time of trouble; the groves with the images of their ancestors. The fear of man and of all they regarded as sacred held them back. It was the most solemn time. We realised the importance to them and their children of their decision, and prayed earnestly for them.²⁴

It was evident that the conversion move was made after deep and continued consideration of the implications related to their pre-existing system of belief. Questions related to the land, ancestors, their spirits, new Sanskritic gods were part and parcel of their considerations.

Furthermore, the issues raised consisted of theological categories, concepts and patterns of thinking from their pre-existing ways of understanding the supernatural and natural dimensions of their existence. Baker, Jr., who was very familiar with caste Hindu religious categories and queries during conversation, particularly recognised the distinct tribal theological concepts appearing in the Malayarayan questions which they asked. Baker, Jr., reported about one of the initial interactions between him and the prospective converts thus:

"Numberless, simple but very practical questions were asked by them, not in a cavilling spirit, like the Brahmins and Vedantists of the plains, but on the atonement, fall of man, sin, misery, future punishment, etc. They occasionally talked among themselves, some making objections, others proposing a trial of the regulations I proposed ..." ²⁵

Theological issues related to misery, disease and punishment, matters with which they were already familiar, seem to have taken primary place in their consideration. Even when missionaries talked about "God who made the whole world and all things, prospective converts' questions were, "Would not the evil spirits persecute them? Would not their ancestors rise in vengeance against them if they forsook the old way?" A.F. Painter's reply to such questions was: "if God be for us, who can be against us?" How far they were convinced about the new ideas initially, we do not know exactly.

Sources of Power

Mid-nineteenth century was a dangerous time for the Malayarayan tribe. Their system of belief, sickness and cure were under threat. Their movement to Christianity was a move towards sources of power; effective power which may help them to deal with crises of confidence in their traditions. Christianity in their perception offered access to education, continued protection to their land and above all, it appeared to help them to handle ancestral spirits (which were becoming less and less effective in dealing with rapid change).

Following features of their conversion confirm this:

In almost all cases of large scale conversion, missionaries had to demonstrate the superior power to control the supernatural beings by throwing away Malayarayan's religious symbols such as granite stones and ancestral figures. Baker, Jr., and

²⁷Painter were invited by converts to destroy places of their ancestor worship.²⁶ At times they urged the missionaries to build churches in their traditional groves. Some felt, "the demons will go for ever," if it was done.

1. The decision of 'devil-priests' and village oracles to accept Christianity was crucial in the positive decision of others in the community. Converts wanted to make sure that their own priests made the move first. Larger numbers moved to Christianity in such places and villages at once.
2. Outbreak of diseases and the consequent feeling of insecurity made many accept the new religion.

Movement To and Fro

It was natural for missionaries to glorify cases of converts who withstood any temptation to go back to their old ways. Reports of missionaries have details about such cases. Numerous cases of "relapses" also were reported. "Unsettled" inquirers sometimes "commenced rebuilding the idolatrous huts," or searched for sacred stones.²⁸ Many converts went back to their traditional religious patterns. But eventually many returned.

By the 1890s, substantial majority of Malayarayangans, numbering about 3000, had already moved over to Christianity. However, we should not forget that it was not a monolithic group of people who joined Christianity. Many moved between the old and the new belief systems. In many cases missionaries could not detect all those implicit or explicit movements of people's minds.

Pulayas

Pulayas or *Cheramar* (*Cherumas*), the agricultural labour outcastes, and one of the lowest status groups in old Kerala, rate themselves a rung above the Parayas. They are numerically the larger of the two. Missionary work aimed at bringing them into the Anglican Communion reached its peak in the latter half of the nineteenth century. They constituted more than half of the membership of the Diocese of Travancore and Cochin in 1947 when it became the Madhya Kerala Diocese of the Church of South India. In the midland region of Travancore and in highlands to the east, they worked as farm hands raising paddy, tapicoa and cash crops while in the paddy fields of the west coast they were ploughers of the soil, sowers of seeds, transplinters of

seedlings, removers of weeds, irrigators, harvesters, dryers of grain and loaders into the wooden storage space. Both men and women participated in all farm operations.

Dalit Religion/Religious Activities

Religion was an integral part of Pulaya social existence. George Mathan, a Church Missionary Society (CMS) Syrian Christian missionary stated, 'with regard to their religious notions and practices, they admit the existence of a Supreme Being but are unable to comprehend how the government of this vast world can be carried without the assistance of subordinate agents.'²⁹ Thus popular conceptions of the deity were mainly confined to 'subordinate agents,' (in step with or parallel to their own status in this world) and spirits of the deceased ancestors which held a major position in their worship. These spirits were called *Chavars*, *Madans*, *Parakutty* and *Chathan*.

Describing the spirit worship a CMS Missionary with many years of ministry among Pulayas observed, 'Their notions of a Deity are very crude; of a God who loves them they know nothing. All their religious ceremonies turn upon keeping off the wrath of malignant spirits: for this purpose they sacrifice cocks whose blood they sprinkle upon their altars.'³⁰ These altars were situated in the midst of groves in certain consecrated raised squares called *Yakshi Ampalam* and *Pey Koil*, as they have no temples.

Pulayas, squeezed at the bottom of the most repressive socio-religious structure known to human beings, were not incapable of striking discordant notes through their ritual activities. Pulaya medicine men and witch doctors claimed secret and close communion with the spirits of the dead and performed *mantravadam* or sorcery. *Mantravadis* were believed to possess the powers of bringing malaise and misfortune on wrong-doers, especially the cruel landlords and wicked bossmen. Pulayas believed in the all pervasive dominion of the spirits on human affairs and held the sorcerers in awe and esteem. The upper castes dreaded these agents of the demons and the ghosts. Some social control over the excesses of the high caste landlords was exercised through the threat of Pulaya black magic in Travancore.³¹

In spite of the prominent role played by the primordial world-view in the worship of the Pulayas, their assimilation into higher sanskritic forms of worship was also evident. *Thevaratampuran*, meaning god whom high castes worship (literally meaning master's god) figured in the Pulaya concept of polytheism or pantheism. *Bhagavati* and *Kali* were the goddesses to be appeased in times of danger and

illness.³²

Festivals were the most obvious institutional expression of social and religious life in the feudal set-up of yesterday's Travancore and Cochin. In festivals and ceremonies connected to the agricultural operations and harvests, Pulayas had a significant level of participation, although some activities in which they participated were rather oppressive like the sham fights in northern Travancore.³³ In some regions Pulayas joined the festival processions. *Vittu Iduka*, a celebration on the day of *Bharani* during the months of February-March was an occasion to bring the paddy seeds to the Bhagavati temples. Pulayas had to stand at an assigned distance while offering the paddy grains. In *Mandalam Vilakku*, a forty-one day celebration in honour of Bhagavati, Pulayas were allowed participation at the culmination of the festivals.³⁴ During the harvesting and threshing seasons Pulayas' ritual participation was an essential requirement and obligation. The Pulaya headman performed ceremonies along with the landowner. Their religious activities reflected and reinforced the hierarchy and fulfilled obligations connected with the caste system in the economic and the social life of the village. The divine hierarchy also was modelled by the earthly hierarchy.

In brief we may note that: (1) Pulayas shared in a multi-tiered religious system; (2) their accessibility was mainly to subordinate gods reflecting their social status; (3) they seem to have been caught up in a kind of 'sanskritization' process as far as their obligatory ritual participation was concerned. With these observations about the religion of the Pulayas let us move on to look at the communication of the Gospel by the missionaries.

COMMUNICATION OF THE GOSPEL

Formalities and Means of Christian Instruction

Christian instruction which preceded baptism and continued within the new Anglican congregations of the Pulayas constituted an important aspect of CMS missionary work. It is not an easy task to assess the effectiveness of even explicit instruction in building up a modicum of comprehension of the Gospel. Information on the content and methods is not as exhaustive as one might have liked. However, it is possible to obtain some idea of the process from the nature of the Christian instruction imparted by the missionaries, the people involved, and the way in which Pulayas responded to

particular aspects of Christian teaching.

Christian instruction involved a considerable amount of teaching in what the missionaries called 'the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel.' This included, among other things, teachings on the 'only means of salvation provided for mankind in Christ,' and 'the distinct offices of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.' The Creed, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments and 'the explanation of them as contained in the Church catechism' were also invariably included in missionary instructions.³⁵

The period between a Pulaya candidate's acceptance of Anglican instruction and actual baptism, which usually extended to about two years, was considered a time of 'probation' during which the candidate had to sufficiently demonstrate 'strictly consistent Christian conduct' revealing a proper understanding of Christian fundamentals. A strict examination of the candidate's 'knowledge' of these teachings was conducted by missionaries immediately prior to baptism. To the CMS missionaries, successful completion of probation and evidence of 'sincere' motivation on the part of the Pulaya candidates were sufficient to be eligible for membership of the invisible Church of Christ. Baptism was an external recognition thereof. After attending a group baptism ceremony along with many other missionary colleagues, Hawksworth gives the following description of the occasion:

We had the first baptism of slave converts in the Velloor school; between fifty and sixty were present, and (from) the numerous candidates for baptism nineteen were admitted into the visible Church of Christ ... Their hearty responses and decided, brief and pointed answers as to motives ... {and} strictly consistent Christian conduct for many months past, ... left no doubts on our minds that many of these, I hope all, were already members of the invisible Church of Christ.³⁶

As is apparent from the above remarks most of the candidates for baptism were considered unsuitable. Indeed, this was a typical situation.

Successful completion of what must have often been a difficult period of learning and probation ended in baptism. Both converts and missionaries considered baptism to be an event of great importance. 'The necessity of being thoroughly prepared' for such an occasion seems to have been taken quite seriously by Pulaya candidates.³⁷ In Most of these ceremonies, one or more missionaries personally examined the

candidates. It is evident from missionary descriptions that the ability to repeat certain teachings and to give set answers was seen as further proof that the candidates understood Christ's way of salvation as preached by the missionaries. A typical baptism is described by Hawkesworth as follows:

There were sixty-five candidates for baptism, all neatly clad (so different from former appearance) and their faces beamed with delight ... They were questioned, not only to ascertain their knowledge of scriptural truth, but also to ascertain, as far as possible, their apprehension of Christ as a living and a present Saviour. Their answers were prompt, correct, and at times, thrilling. To the question, 'Why is Christ gone to heaven,' the reply, instant, unanimous, and self-interested was, 'He is gone to prepare a place for us!' Doubtful cases were carefully canvassed, especially by one who had visited them from hut to hut, and does so regularly, who knows them individually.³⁸

Communicators of the Gospel

English missionaries and the Syrian Christian priests prominent in the Anglican hierarchy were the first groups to convey the Christian message to the Pulayas. Instruction mainly took place during routine, but rather infrequent, visits to the congregations. In most cases the English missionaries seem to have taught and preached in the vernacular, although occasionally they relied on translators.

From the comment and evaluation of the missionaries, it can be assumed that the preaching and verbal communication of the Gospel were largely a one-way process, and not much of what they preached was actually understood. In fact language itself was one of the main barriers. Andrews, who was well versed in Malayalam, observed, 'How earnestly I long to preach Christ to these poor jungle slaves. Their language or dialect, is very peculiar. But they understood you much better than you can understand them.'³⁹ Apparently the colloquial of Pulaya speech and language was vastly different from that of other caste groups like Syrian Christians and Nairs, with whom the missionaries communicated on a regular basis. English missionaries were unable to truly enter into the spirit and style of Pulaya verbal communication. This is how Andrews commented on the translation by Peet, a Malayalam scholar among the Travancore missionaries, on another missionary's lesson to a group of Pulayas: 'I am afraid not much of the good advice has been understood. Few among them can make a long grammatical sentence. Their own colloquial is peculiarly short and categorical, almost every other sentence being in the form of a question.'⁴⁰

Syrian Christian missionaries were also somewhat dissatisfied with the quality of their own communication with the Pulayas during Christian instruction. Koshi Koshi and I. Eapen who earnestly tried to enter into dialogue with the converts did not meet with much success because the Pulayas' conversational style and skill were different from what they expected. In fact, the new Christian vocabulary introduced by the missionaries was somewhat alien to them.⁴¹ While teaching the Pulaya candidates of Mepra, Koshi Koshi found many responses from the candidates did 'not fully correspond' to Anglican Christian instruction. It was apparent that several Christian concepts and terms as taught by them had not always survived the journey into Pulaya minds unscathed. Koshi Koshi observed, 'It is indeed a hard struggle for them to get at some of the terms necessarily employed in their instruction such as 'repentance,' 'faithfulness,' etc., so that they often said one thing while [they] meant quite another ...'⁴²

Ideas

'One must not suppose these slaves do not exercise their reason' observed Andrews, despite the extreme frustration he felt in his struggle to teach the Pulayas.⁴³ Notwithstanding the limitations in the explicit communication of the Christian message, certain ideas appear to have made a stronger appeal to the Pulayas than to anyone else.

The notion of a God or a Supreme Being who is accessible and approachable was not easy to comprehend for many Pulaya converts. Indeed, such a notion of God was in complete contradiction to their traditional religious experience. A.F. Painter while discussing the Pulaya belief system observed. 'The existence of a Supreme Being is acknowledged by them, but they have been taught to believe that they are too degraded to approach Him.'⁴⁴ Before their conversion to Christianity the Pulayas only worshipped the regional and local deities as distinct from other deities which were accessible only to higher castes. Moreover, this practice corresponded with their caste position in society. Andrews attempted at one point to explain his understanding of a Supreme God drawing a parallel between the untouchables' accessibility to the Raja and to God. However, this analogy made no sense as the Pulayas had no access to the Rajas in the first place, and would have been killed if they made a move in that direction. To them God was associated with 'evil' and was mostly inaccessible. They did not want to be near Hsim.⁴⁵ Thus Christian concepts which did not correspond to the Pulayas' experience were not readily accepted by

the candidates.

At the same time, Pulaya candidates seem to have been attracted by certain attributes of God as portrayed by Anglican missionaries. Several missionaries note that the concept of a loving God found receptive ears among the Pulayas. Andrews observes: "it was indeed good news to them to hear that God loved them, and would have them to be saved. They seemed to have gained

ideas of the deity, and the love of Christ has been direct contrast to the Pulayas' established beliefs about the deity. Indeed, their religious activities were directed towards containing the negative power, particularly the wrath of the gods. So, why did these Pulaya candidates respond so positively to the idea of a loving God? Apparently, the practical implications of such an attribute of God as portrayed by the missionaries encouraged a positive response. Some missionaries linked their sermons and lessons to Pulaya aspirations for better treatment in society. The following description of how Koshi Koshi preached to Pulayas reveals how certain Christian ideas affected them.

I spoke to them about the only one God the creator of all things, about the nothingness of idols, the sin of idolatry, sin in general, and its terrible consequences after death and of the only means of salvation provided for all mankind in Christ. They appeared pleased that all men of both high castes and low castes were alike in the sight of God and all descended from the same common parents and that our holy religion recognised no distinction of caste but Christians are taught to regard all classes as brothers and sisters.⁴⁶

The very fact that Pulayas were accepted into a religion of their masters and were able to have access to the religious privileges which came with it was sufficient demonstration of the missionary message of love and equality. Andrews, the most popular missionary among the Pulayas, linked salvation through Christianity among other things to the privileges which 'had now come to the slaves.' The right of Pulaya Christians 'to assemble for learning, or to take Sabbath for a rest' were shown as evidence of such privileges.⁴⁷ Similarly, George Mathan, the pioneer of the anti-slavery movement, preached to the Pulayas about their wretched condition and of the benefits they would derive, temporally as well as spiritually, by embracing Christianity.⁴⁸ Such messages linking Christianity to certain privileges that the Pulayas might enjoy definitely caught their imagination.

The image of the Christian God as a powerful guarantee against 'Satan's special attacks and hatred' seems to have found ready acceptance. In fact, the use of such images by the missionaries to get across the Christian message obviously reinforced some of the Pulayas' pre-existing notions of God. One missionary observed that Christianity offered Pulayas 'deliverance from the fear of the devil, whom they stand in the greatest terror.' A Nair reported to the missionaries that after the arrival of Christianity among the Pulayas the 'evil spirits were obliged to run away from the places' and there was 'scarcely any instance of demonical possession' among them.⁴⁹ Some of the priests of the Pulayas who converted to Christianity demolished the images of their deities in the presence of the missionaries, thereby suggesting belief in the power of the new God which they had found in Christianity.

'Slaves believe that persons attacked with any disease if prayed over in their Church will get cured,' observed Oommen Mammen.⁵⁰ Epidemics particularly put such belief to the test. In Tiruvalla during a cholera outbreak Pulaya converts brought the sick for the prayer. When patients died, it brought ridicule from non-Christian Pulayas. Indeed, missionaries feared that 'enquirers might backslide' when it was seen that Christian prayer had failed. Moreover there were incidents which indicate that some Pulayas saw baptism as a guarantee against disease and calamity.

From the available sources it is not entirely clear how widespread these beliefs were. However, it is clear that Christian teachings which could be demonstrated in practical everyday life were better received than others.

Cultural Continuities

'A host of baptised heathens ... a mass of Pulayas calling themselves Christians who are impure and heathen in their lives.'⁵¹ This is how Caley, an Anglican missionary who greatly influenced the attitudes and the policies of the CMS mission in Travancore until the end of the nineteenth century, referred to Pulaya Christians. These remarks were made precisely 20 years after the first Pulaya baptism. Significantly, the Bishop of the diocese used similar words to express his dissatisfaction with the Pulaya Christians within the Anglican Church. He said, they were 'degenerating into a state of heathenism.'⁵²

From the initial stages of the conversion movement, CMS missionaries were determined to implement rigid Christianisation and as far as possible prevent any

contact between Christian and non-Christian Pulayas. Adult baptism did not take place until converts had demonstrated sufficient evidence of strict separation. The structures established for Christian instruction, examination of Christian motives, and finally baptism itself were developed to guard against any form of accommodation and weed out any remaining non-Christian practice.

Despite the strict Christianisation and its apparent success, it did not take long for the missionaries to discover the persistence of non-Christian religious and cultural practices among Pulaya converts. Responding to this problem, Koshi Koshi, a Syrian Christian priest, wrote: 'The facts and doctrines of Christianity appeared to have fared much like the contents of a leaky vessel.'⁵³ Indeed, CMS missionaries were conceding the failure of Christianisation at least in certain Pulaya moves.

Both English and Syrian Christian missionaries felt disappointed at the continuation of pre-Christian religio-cultural practices among the converts.⁵⁴ The Provincial Council of the CMS in Travancore, which consisted of both missionaries and Syrian Christian priests, formally discussed this issue and concluded that the Pulaya Christians were 'not well established in the faith.' It is evident that this comment was made in direct reference to continued pre-Christian religious practices.

Referring to the tendency of converts to resort to non-Christian practices to ward off the 'evil' effects of 'former gods,' Bishop Hodges wrote, 'The Pulayas are often found to be uncertain and foolish as children, and easily led away.'⁵⁵ Several references to the continued practice of non-Christian ceremonies can also be found in missionary letters. 'Superstitious dread of the corpse of a person' who died of smallpox was common among Pulaya Christians and missionaries found it difficult to secure a 'Christian burial' for victims of smallpox. The failure of Western medicine easily led some converts to promise offerings or sacrifices to temples. Having analysed this practice, C.A. Neve observed,

At times of epidemics, especially smallpox ... some of our converts are exposed to great temptation to fall away from their Christian faith, and join their old heathen associates in offering to the Demon who is supposed to be the author of the disease.⁵⁶

Thus for at least some Pulaya converts the distinctions between Christians and non-Christians were not as sharp as the missionaries expected.

Conclusion

Has Horton's theory any relevance to the Malayarayan and Pulaya conversions is worth examining in detail if somebody can take up the anthropological task. However, here let me make some brief observations:

Firstly, the two-tier structure of African cosmology does not fit the Pulayas' pre-existing belief system which was multi-tiered, incorporating an hierarchy of gods. Spirits of the deceased ancestors had a significant role and position in their religious activities. On the next level were 'subordinate agents' or malignant and malevolent spirits. *Thevaratampuran* (master's god), *Bhagavati* and *Kali*, comparatively high forms of deity, also figured in the Pulaya religious activities.

Secondly, the preaching of the CMS missionaries was in direct contradiction to the Pulayas' previously-held thought patterns and perceptions of God although certain concepts such as protection from evil spirits and the concept of equality were part of their pre-Christian cosmology. Especially important in contradicting missionary teaching was the traditional conviction about the wrath of gods. Missionaries largely admitted failure in conveying this message.

Thus missionary communication cleared the path not for a fulfillment but for a contradiction or a confrontation of two opposites – Gods of wrath and the God of love. Consequently in the transference of ideas they confronted obstacles and failures.

I would like to observe that pre-existing ideas were not conducive to Pulaya conversion to Christianity. They may have converted in spite of the pre-existing belief system. Possibly the most effective communications were those related to sociological aspects like equality of castes. In fact this only confirms the overall proposition of historians of Christian conversion in India that the sociological rather than cosmological factors were of primary importance in the conversion process of dalits.

Thirdly, the two-tier structure of African cosmology does not fit the Malayarayan's pre-existing belief system which was an integrated whole. They had a hierarchy of primal spirits and some Sanskritic gods at the time in question (1840s to 1890s). Spirits of the deceased ancestors had a significant role in their beliefs. Comparatively high forms of deity, borrowed from Hinduism such as *Kali* and *Ayyappan*, also figured

in their cosmology although not as a top tier.

Fourthly, the preaching and practice of missionaries which Malayarayans heard and saw seem to have helped these tribal people to move although with ambivalence, to certain new notions of God/Spirit who is "more powerful." The socio-economic change in motion by the plantations, diseases and epidemics, created a crisis of confidence in adjusting to or adapting with existence and environment. Christianity and certain related ideas came to them in such a predicament. Christianity and its belief system were conducive to Malayarayan conversion to the new religion. They all have converted to Christianity because of some of the Christian cosmological understandings which were in continuity to their previously held notions of spirit and a God/Spirit who could deal with crises and change.

Our analysis confirms that pre-existing religious ideas played a role in Malayarayan conversion to Christianity. Christianity seems to have offered to them a package to deal with crises of the mid-nineteenth century. However, they did not seem to completely replace one system of belief with another. Malayarayans appear to have appropriated new ways to deal with their changing world-view.

Although pre-conversion belief systems had similarities in both the cases they seem to be responding to the religious move in different ways. For instance, both groups had primal features appearing very prominently in their belief systems. Moreover, both were caught up in a process of 'Sanskritization.' However, when responding we see significant variations. Very tentatively, I would like to observe that it was the socio-economic context which seems to determine the way they would handle the conversion process and not necessarily their previous belief systems.

Tribals seem to have been more responsive to the religious/intellectual ideas involved in the process of interaction between two world-views. Whereas, dalits appear to have made the move to Christianity inspite of the apparent contradictions involved in the ideas that were confronting them. They pushed forward with socio-economic aspects at the top of their interaction and continued their search for self-dignity and social improvement. In fact, as we noted earlier, dalits were more responsive to ideas which had some concrete social implications.

For tribals, in the face of radical change or threat of change, issues related to preservation of their identity and space on the one hand, and dealing with the new

world-view on the other, were vital to their sustained and meaningful continuance. Whereas, dalits are seeking social change and uplift through a religious conversion process.

Finally, it would be a historical distortion to claim a definitive knowledge about what is happening in the ideational interaction that is taking place in these movements. There is a sense of ambivalence coming across in both cases of religious interaction. The religious interface and the movement between boundaries are clear indicators of it. Both tribals and dalits moved between pre-existing and Christian world-views and there seems to be emerging a hybridity of ideational search.

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