
UNIT 3 RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

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Learning Objectives



This unit will teach you about:

- the importance of religion in contemporary life;
- religious conflicts; and
- how different kinds of conflicts are found in different societies.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

‘Anthropology of Religion’ has been one of the important areas of anthropological research. However, during the last three decades or so the study of various aspects of religion such as the growing religious conflict, religious consciousness and religious movements have assumed significant dimensions in the wake of ‘religion’, in one way or the other, occupying the centrestage in different parts of the world including south Asia.

The present unit deals with two accounts— one from India dealing with religious conflict and violence in the wake of the rise of Hindu Nationalism (understood in the Indian context as *Hindutva*) and the other with Iran where the religious dispute took the form of revolution and changed the Iranian society in several ways.

3.2 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY *Iran from Religious Dispute to Revolution* IS AN EXAMPLE

The situation in Iran is different from the rest of the Islamic world, for Iran is a country of Shia Muslims. In terms of civilisational complex, it is Persian. Changes started occurring in Iran after Ayatollah Khomeini came to power. This monograph deals with the contribution of different cultures at different points of time.

3.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

3.3.1 Intellectual Context

The book published in 1980 is devoted to the role of religion in social transformation. Not many works are devoted to religious education. The focus of the author is on the role of religious education in moulding the character of people.

3.3.2 Fieldwork

The author of the monograph conducted first hand fieldwork in Iran. This book began as a personal note. The author has always been concerned with the self-reflective dimensions about the ethnographic and anthropological endeavour. All this is reflected in this work. The author made use of the historical method in his work.

3.3.3 Analysis of Data

Iran is one of the largest and most powerful Muslim countries of the world and is different from the mainstream Islamic world and is represented by Shia Muslims (the mainstream Islamic world is represented by the Sunni Muslims). Moreover, it is also different civilisationally – unlike the Arab civilisation, it is Persian civilisation. To understand contemporary Iran's complex society and polity, it is essential to grasp the historic changes initiated by Ayotallah Khomeini in 1979- the supreme religious and spiritual leader of not only Iranian people but also conceded as one of the most influential leaders of the Shias of the world.

As the author of this monograph Michael. M. J. Fischer points out, “one of the great puzzles for anthropologists and philosophers is how and why culture and common sense are differently constituted in different historical times and in different societies.” Today in Iran both culture and common sense are undergoing change. This work examines the transformation, particularly the part played by religion. The focus is on religious education, both learned and popular, and its function in moulding character and thereby reinforcing the common sense. This function may also be called as the anthropology of education.

The present monograph begins with a philosophical discussion on Culture, History and Politics. Two of the most interesting segments of culture are symbolic structures and common sense. In the religious realm of culture, Shiaism is the established form of Islam in Iran. It may be understood in several forms of expressions such as preaching, passion plays and the curricula and debates of the *madrassa* (a typical religious school) which can be viewed as cultural form

composed of symbolic structures. Within this perspective Islam is not merely a set of doctrines that can be simply catalogued. Rather, it is a “language” used in different ways by different actors in order to persuade their followers, to manipulate situations, and to achieve control of political position. In Iran, there are at least four main styles of using Shiaism, the popular religion of the villages and *bazaars* (popular, traditional markets) which may encompass a number of local or ‘little traditions’, the scholarly religious (textual) being imparted in the madrasa where the religious leaders are trained, the Islamic mysticism known as Sufism, and the privatised, ethical religion of the upper classes. A fifth style may also be added which may be a combination of the scholarly religion of the madrasas and the privatised, ethical religion of the upper classes which Dr. Ali Shariati’s (a sociologist-philosopher- liberal scholar) followers have promoted as the ideological basis of the 1977-79 revolution. Ali Shariati, the hero of Iran’s youth in the 1970s attempted to bridge the gap between traditional Shiaism and contemporary sociology.

Reflection

Shia Islam (Arabic Shi’i) is the second largest denomination of Islam after Sunnis. Shia is the short form of the historic phrase *Shiatu Ali* (Friends or followers of Ali or party of Ali). Like other schools of thought in Islam, Shia Islam is based on the teaching of the Quran and the message of Prophet Muhammad. In contrast to other schools of thought, the Shias believe that only God has the right to choose a representative to lead and safeguard Islam, the Quran, the Sharia. They believe that Ali was chosen to succeed Muhammad after his death and Ali was succeeded by eleven Imams (leaders) through his lineage, the twelfth Imam being still alive and in hiding. Thus, they reject the institution of caliphate. The Shias believe that Muhammad’s family the *Ahl-al-Bayt* has special spiritual and political authority over the community. The overwhelming majority of the Shias are known as Twelver Shias believing in twelve Imams while the minority Shia sub-sects are Ismaili Khojas and Dawoodi Bohras. Iran, Iraq and Azerbaijan are the Shia majority countries followed by Bahrain where, though in majority, they are not the rulers. It is largely believed that the Shias constitute around 20% of the total Muslim population of the World.

Several accounts of religion and political conflict in Iran have been written but most of these failed to convey the religious sensibility and its transformation perfectly. It was not an easy task. As per the Shia doctrine, their last Imam is in hiding going into occultation in the ninth century AD (he is not dead, merely not manifest in the world) and shall appear at an appropriate time. This belief gave the Shias strength and a sense of security in the face of persecution by the non-shia rulers. The belief in an Imam (leader) in the hiding should not be taken that whatever the Kings or temporal leaders and government do should be taken as illegitimate and wrong. It simply means that such authorities should not be followed blindly and if they deviate or violate Islam/Shiasim, they must be defied. This led to the popular revolt against the King of Iran during 1977-79 revolution.

The institution of Madrasa plays a vital role in the Shiite Iranian Islam. The madrasa schools represent a form of education, the western world would be familiar with as they are the same as the Jewish ‘Ye Shiva’ and the catholic medieval stadium. All three has lost their creative vitality by the thirteenth or

fourteenth century replaced by modern universities and other secular institutions. But the story of the madrasa is a story of rise, decline and again rise of a traditional institution. The madrasa is a symbolic structure as well as an educational forum. The curricula do not impart religious education only but also includes philosophy, logic, history, geography etc. It has also been accommodative to modern demands. Significantly the state and the religious establishment always considered the other a threat to its own legitimacy and have been suspicious of each other. The madrasas in Iran have been like a free university with lot of flexibility where the students enjoyed greater freedom and come for the sake of learning. They may choose their teachers and continue as long as they wish. The early dropouts may just act as village preachers and the serious ones after years of learning may become scholars or legal experts (*Mujtahid*).

Though madrasas in Iran vary in terms of style and substance, the madrasa centre of Qum (a city in Iran) holds a special significance. Qum may be described as the religious heart of Shia Iran. It played a very important role in the transformation/revolution of 1979. Qum is located 150 km. from Tehran, the capital of Iran. Currently, it is the largest centre for Shia scholarship in the world and attracts Shias of the entire world interested in religious scholarship. It is described as the city of seminaries. Most of the seminaries teach their students modern social sciences and western thought as well as traditional religious studies. Qum is considered holy by the Shias. It is a small town with practically no industry. It is still a very traditional town based on farming weaving, some herding, selling to pilgrims prayer material as souvenirs and services to the madrasas and shrine population. Although Qum has a long madrasa tradition, the current set of madrasas are only a century old. Most of the exalted religious scholars known as *Ayatollah* come from the Qum seminaries. This includes Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader, of 1979 revolution. The radical – revolutionary thoughts of Iranian Islam come from this centre and that is why the King Razashah Pahalvi clamped a number of restrictions on its clergy and that is why Qum emerged as the ‘arena of conflict’.

The influence of Qum may not be very vital to Shiaism in day to day life of the common people but the sanctity of the ‘Tragedy of Karbala’ gets further legitimacy from the seminaries of Qum. More than any other event in its history, the ‘tragedy of Karbala’ has moulded the psyche of the Shias and it played a crucial role in the overthrow of the powerful King backed by US. These events may not be understood in entirety without having some idea of this tragic event which created the eternal schism in the Islamic world. After the death of Prophet Mohammed, the group of his followers closely affiliated to Ali, his cousin, associate and son-in-law was called *Shia-tu-Ali-* (the friends of Ali). The people belonging to this group, while disassociating themselves from others, formed a nucleus around Ali and believed in his *Imamate* (leadership). Thus, the term ‘Shia’ means all those who support the claim of Ali as the first and rightful, direct successor to Mohammed. They considered Ali as the successor of Mohammad in temporal as well as spiritual matters. The Shias further believe that *Allah* and His prophet (Mohammad) has clearly designated Ali as the only legitimate successor of Mohammed, who has continued all the fourteen hundred years, to preserve, uninfluenced by political and dynastic considerations the teachings and directions of Mohammad in their original and purest form through his (Alis’) descendents – the twelve Imams. Thus, the Shias clearly reject the institution of caliphate coming into existence after the death of Mohammad. Those who did not agree

with this Shia stand and recognised caliphate are popularly called Sunni and constitute the mainstream Islam/Muslims. The Shias were pushed to the fringe and did not enjoy any political power for centuries. Most of their Imams were poisoned or assassinated and they continued to face persecution in the entire Muslim world.

After the ‘martyrdom’ of Ali the ‘tragedy to Karbala’ played the most important role in the growth of Shiasim and Shia identity. It was in the year 680 AD that Husain, the third Imam of Shias, son of Ali and grandson of Mohammad from his daughter Fatima was brutally massacred together with his seventy two companions by the forces of Yazid, the then Muslim caliph, at the desert town of Karbala, now in Iraq. Mohammads’ family and descendants were humiliated. The commemoration of tragedy of Karbala forms the basis of the Muharram mourning observance throughout the world. The intensity of grief over tragedy of Karbala is seen to be believed. Many describe the hearts of the Shias as the ‘living tomb of Husain’. The grief is reflected in the day to day life of the Shias and to a large extent forms the basis of Shia identity.

Religious settings in the villages and old urban neighborhoods serve a variety of social needs. The mosque with its daily routine of prayer, the weekly gatherings for religious discussion, the annual passion plays related with commemoration of Husain’s tragedy, mournings on the death days of various Imams and celebration of their births, special pilgrimages to the Shia shrines and celebration of the death of the tormentors of Shia Imams constitute important events in the daily life of the people. Visit to the various stopping places of saints (*Imamzada, qadamgah*), *sacred* trees and wells for vows and cures, the *Khanqah* or shrines of Sufi Saints are favourite events especially in women’s lives. Charity to the assembled beggars and Thursday *Ziyarat* (visits, pilgrimages) to the graveyards to ancestral ties and duties are some other important events in the lives of the people. *Ulema* (Clerics) are not involved in some of these events. They lead prayers in the mosque as *Imams* (leader of prayers). An educated village *Imam* can be an important community leader. Even the *Ayatollahs* (elevated clerics) also serve as Imams in their respective places.

The position of *Imam-e-juma* (leader of Friday prayer) in big cities were usually state appointees till Khomeini’s revolution in 1979. For the god fearing and pious Shia Muslims they were a butt of joke and hardly commanded peoples’ respect as most of them were ignorant to Arabic — the language of the Islamic religion, and it was alleged that they were addicted to sports cars, wine and women in Switzerland. These ulemas teaching Islam but not embodying it in their lives were anathema to the masses. Same was the case with westernised Muslims.

Sufism, in different forms remain important to the Persian/Iranian consciousness. The Sufi saints, their teaching and poetry appealed to the masses as well as to the highly urbane, sophisticated and westernised upper class. The masses consider such individuals, who are open and trust worthy, as the true sufis or *darvesh*. ‘Such individuals need not worry about proper clothes or rules of propriety because they are epitome of honesty and hospitality and thus enjoy moral authority. Such persons have rejected materialism and worldly temptations and refused to blindly follow the royal diktats. Together with the dissenting clerics they acted as the central point of dissent and revolt against the Safavid King who ruled Iran up to 1979.

The Revolutionary Movement of 1977-79

Iranian society like any other society of the world has been changing not exactly as Europe or America. A transformation from a patrimonial agrarian society to an industrial-technocratic one was going on. Like several agrarian societies, men and women had different roles. In Iran it was largely in conformity to the Islamic morality revealed in their first and most revered Imam Ali's sermons but the Shah (King) of Iran was a man in hurry and took to, largely, Turkey's example of forced modernisation espoused by its leader Kemal Ataturk, who wanted the Turkish Muslims to ape the western lifestyle and imbibe the western secular life style and value system. His draconian and anti-democratic way of governance not allowing any dissent compounded the situation further.

Exiled by the King, Ayatollah Khomeini was living in Paris and then migrated to Iraq. But Dr. Ali Shariati, a charismatic scholar, philosopher, socialist was already very popular there. The conservative clerics did not see eye to eye to Shariati for his modern Shiite views appealing to the masses especially to the educated youth. He was expelled from the University of Mashhad. His idea of reform was not in consonance with the conservative interpretation of Islam espoused by many clerics. Trained at Sorbonne, France he was working on an Islamic sociology. When his ideas began appealing to sections of students studying in the traditional madarsa, many clerics were alarmed. Thus, he antagonised the royal authority as well as the clerical authority in general. He called for rethinking the Islamic message by thinking about Islam in sociological terms rather than metaphysical terms. He did content analysis of the Quran through linguistic – phenomenological analysis of key Islamic terms. He rejected western capitalism and had a vision of a just Islamic society. He represented the modernist Shiite thought thus antagonising the monarchy as well as the clergy.

In any narration of how the religious dispute led to revolution, the role of Ali Shariati and Ayatollah Khomeini's teaching occupy the central place. While Shariati was developing his ideas of a modernist Shiite Islam, Khomeini was espousing the concept of *marje-e-taqleed*, and *Wilayat-e-faqih*, thus both hitting at the roots of the tyrannical monarchy. The term *marja-e-taqleed* designates the highest ranking authorities of the 'Twelver Shia' community. There used to be 4-8 such high ranking jurists (ayatollahs) but after 1970's the Shia community was dominated by two ayatollahs of immense stature- Ayatollah Khomeini (1902-1989) an Iranian, and Ayatollah Khui (1899-1992) an Iraqi, whose followers were mostly Arabic speaking Shias. The terms *marja* refers to centre and *taqleed* refers to following. Thus the highest ranking cleric leads the community in both religious and secular matters. It gave legitimacy and recognition to these clerics. The term *wilayat-e-faqih* means the guardianship of the jurist. Khomeini was accepted as such by a large number of Shias of Iran and elsewhere. When he came to power in 1979, he became the supreme arbiter of all matters of government in Iran.

With the beginning of the decade of 1970's, the restlessness of the Shia community against the dictatorial governance of the King was craving for political liberation. The causes of the revolution were both economic and political. Oil prices increased in 1973 and it led to several structural problems. The massive increase in revenues led to reckless spending and phenomenal increase in urban wages and a very high rate of inflation. The increased urban wages caused massive migration from

rural to urban area as the rural population was suffering from stagnation in agricultural sector due to relative neglect of agricultural sector. There were hardly any incentives for the peasantry. Instead of raising production prices by supplying credit to stimulate production, food was imported on a massive scale and sold at subsidised rates. Small producers were not given any respite and money was channeled towards new mechanised agriculture and projects dependent on large irrigation dams.

Large sections of peasants were displaced and squeezed off the land to make way for the agribusiness and state farm co-operations. To top it, lakhs of semi-skilled and skilled labour were imported from foreign countries – Afghanis, Koreans and others were preferred. That also led to great resentment.

Dissent was always hated by the monarchy, but harassment of dissidents both rural and urban increased. SAVAK, the secret Police of the Kings' administration was used recklessly to crush all dissidents. They were picked, detained and many never appeared again. Muharram commemoration of 1977 and 1978 was used politically to mobilise the mourners. The King was popularly portrayed as Yazid-the Muslim caliph, hated by the Shias for his role in the massacre of Imam Hussain and his family and friends in Karbala. Now the revolution was on. It was joined by the rural folk, students, intellectuals, religious clergy, petty traders and left-wing activists. Ayatollah Khomeini who was living in Iraq for several years and leading the anti-King forces, was forced to leave Iraq. He got asylum in France where he continued to live till his triumphant return to Iran. The entire Iran was engulfed in protest including its major cities- Tehran, Isfahan, Mashhad, Qum, Shiraz, Abadan and others. Amidst lot of bloodshed, the King left Iran on January 16, 1979 and went to USA, its protector, promoter and closest ally. Later, dissidents who did not agree with the King but also differed with Ayatollah Khomeini on ideological issues-prominent clerics like Ayatollah Teleghani, leftist organisations such as Mujahiden-e-Khalq and Fidayeen-e-Khalq and a host of others – were persecuted by the Khomeini regime too. Now, the religious revolution was complete. The Kings' socially liberal policies, especially with relations to the status and freedom to women, were also reversed and Iran became a theocratic state. Shiaism was given a radical and militant idiom. The political revolution also served to revolutionise Shiaism itself and led to many changes.

3.3.4 Conclusion

This book shows that the Iranian society is changing but it is not like the change that is occurring in Europe or America. The society is changing from an agrarian state to an industrial-technocratic one. The role of religious education is examined in detail.

3.4 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

Certain parts of the world have remained relatively unstudied and that includes the Islamic world. This ethnography advances our understanding of the Islamic world, especially that of the Shias.

3.5 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY *Religious Division and Social Conflict: The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in Rural India* IS AN EXAMPLE

The ethnography *Religious division and social conflict: The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in Rural India*, by Peggy Froerer describes the role of religion in society.

3.6 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

3.6.1 Intellectual Context

Emile Durkheim's thesis states that religion performs the function of integrating society; however this theory is applicable to those societies that have a singularity of religion. In a religiously plural society, this thesis is not applicable because of the likely conflict between different religions and their ideologies. This ethnography asserts this view.

3.6.2 Fieldwork

The author of this work carried out a piece of fieldwork with a tribal community using the standard anthropological methods. Historical data was also collected.

3.6.3 Analysis of Data

Religion may play an integrative role in uni-religious lands and nations but may be divisive under certain circumstance and conditions in multi-religious societies. The social conflicts we are witnessing, in present day India, in the arena of religious faiths has been studied from different angles in various disciplines of social sciences.

The present study deals with 'religious division' and 'social conflict' with reference to the rise of Hindu Nationalism. The research was carried out between 1997-99 in Mohanpur, a village located in one of the more densely forested subdivisions (*tehsil*) of Korba district in Chattisgarh having a large tribal population. There is an extensive body of academic work within different social sciences devoted to the origins and contemporary manifestations of the Hindu nationalist movement. Moreover, the present monograph may also be viewed within the contest of more competitive religious assertions taking place across the globe and the present study deals with this aspect with reference to Hindu and Christian religious assertions.

The RSS, Adivasis and Christianity

Protecting the 'Hindu nation' against conversion to Islam has been central to the agenda of Rashtriya Swam Sewak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliating organisations but from 1970s onwards it incorporated Christianity too in the wake of some conversions of Adivasi communities of central India to Christianity and this become its central concern. As the author writes "One of the objectives of this book is to demonstrate how particular strategies being employed by RSS activists are underpinned by the broader mimetic relationship that the organisation has

with the Church. Throughout India the more visible forms of mimesis include the re-conversion programme.” The *Vanvasi Kalyam Ashram* and the *Vidya Bharti*, affiliates of the RSS that are concerned with the physical welfare and education of tribal communities, are patterned after the church’s long term engagement in the social upliftment of more vulnerable communities.

Area and People

The fieldwork for this ethnography was carried out between 1997-99 in the village Mohanpur near Korba of Chattisgarh. It is a rice growing area and cut off from urban mainstream. The total population of the village was 886 consisting of 163 households. The village is divided mainly into two groups-Hinduised/Hindu Adivasis and Christian Oraons. Ratiya Kanwar, Majhwar and Dudh Kanwar are Hindu scheduled tribes while the Oraons are a Christian scheduled tribe. The non-advasi households consist of Yadav (OBC) and Panika, Chauhan and Lohar (scheduled castes). The Ratiya Kanwar are the earliest settlers in this village and they are the dominant group. They have been living in this village for 9-10 generations. They are enjoying the highest social status, first settler status and landownership makes them the most dominant group followed by Majhwar and Dudh Kanwar who settled here 2-3 generations after Ratiya Kanwar. The Christian Oraons comprise of 241 people divided into 42 households. Significantly the adjoining twenty villages have no Christian presence and the local catholic mission is located 6 kms from this village.

In the local caste/social hierarchy the Yadav, Panika, Lohar and Chauhan despite being scheduled castes enjoy higher status than the adivasis/scheduled tribes. Christian Oraons come lowest. Within Ratiya Kanwar group and within the village as a whole Gandhel clan is the most powerful being the earliest settlers. The traditional authority in the village lies with the Gandhel clan of Ratiya Kanwar and the entire village acknowledges their authority. The Christian Oraons arrived from Pathelgaon- a town near Jashpur and settled here in the 1970s and they feel indebted to the Ratiya Kanwar for allowing them to settle down in the village. Significantly all the Oraons are Christians and they happen to be the only Christians in this village. The village head man allowed the four earliest families of the Oraons to settle here on the condition that they would establish their *Basti* (settlement) atleast half a kilometer away from the village and shall not use the village well because of ritual reason as they were considered as untouchables. The first wave of migration was followed by some other Oraon families who joined them in the same *basti*. All of them came in search of good cultivable land. Today the Christian Oraons are the second largest group in the village after Ratiya Kanwar.

Because of their untouchable status and not serving any specific ritual or economic role for the Hindus, there is little daily interaction with the Hindus. Yet, they occasionally participate in communal labour activities. Their ‘outsider’ status is underlined by linguistic differences too. They speak *Kurukh*, a Dravidian based language having no relation with *Chatribole*, the popular dialect of Chattisgarh spoken by the rest of the population.

Oraons and Christianity

The Oraons converted to Christianity only two generations ago but became practicing Christians only after migration to Mohanpur under the impact of the

local catholic mission situated nearby. Though the catholic mission in central India has been working since 1840 but its impact was negligible. Later it became popular only when they took up non-Evangelical activities in the field of education, medical services, famine relief, cooperative banking etc. Significantly, religious conversion was a collective act and not individual. Thus, it was like a mass movement. Conversion to Christianity helped them combat the exploitative landlords/moneylenders. They were organised and mobilised by the mission, developed consciousness about their exploitation and ways and means to combat it. A little education too, was also an empowering factor.

In 1970s a dispensary and health clinic was opened and two catholic sister-cum-nurses joined followed by the construction of a small church. The medicines and potions distributed by the dispensary posed a challenge to the prevalent traditional healing method and it created some social tension. The Christian Oraons could never be assimilated in the local population because of their belief in a different faith – Christianity.

Oraons' Economy

The economic activities of the Oraons helped them attain prosperity within a short period of time. Though they did not have much cultivable land, they supplemented their income by earning as wage labour in construction sites of the nearby town, Korba. They were also experts in preparing liquor from *Mahua* flower and sold it to the entire village. Since they did not have substantial land, they did not have many Mahua trees and hence they purchase it from the local shopkeepers. The Ratiya, Kanwar used to sell their mahua to the shopkeepers instead of selling it directly to the Oraons but the margin of profit carried from the sale of liquor compensated the cost. Thus, they became more prosperous than the other groups in the village. The Oraons gave credit of their prosperity to hard work and Christ's blessings. Thus, liquor production and vending became one of their stable sources of income supplemented by the cash earned by them as wage labourer.

Hindu Adivasis

They virtually monopolised land ownership and are politically much more empowered than the Oraon Christians. Yet, their livelihood largely depended upon cultivation. Erratic monsoon and the resultant decreased yield has been a big barrier in their economic mobility and prosperity. Because of increasing Hinduisation popular Hindu gods such as Rama, Krishna, and Shiva entered into their pantheon but these 'big gods' are less involved than the local tribal deities in the affairs of day to day life. Moreover, the local deities are neither housed nor worshipped in the small village temple. This temple is meant for propitiation of 'big gods'. Brahmin priests occasionally visit it to supervise rituals 3-4 times every year and express resentment for the neglect and non-maintenance of the temple.

Points of tension and role of the RSS

Life in the village has been going on its pace with minor tensions emerging and getting dissolved through the mediation of the panchayat, till 1980s when the RSS emerged as an important actor in this region. However, the effective intervention of RSS in the village affairs may be traced back to 1990s. Its' local headquarter is located in Korba where its activists (*pracharaks*) reside and operate

in the adjoining areas. A young man from the dominant Ratiya Kanwar group, who could not make it big during his stay in the nearby town, facilitated the entry of RSS pracharakas into the village. It assiduously cultivated the Gandher clan of Ratiya Kanwar which became its support base in the times to come. These activists started promoting the Hindutva agenda by projecting the Christian Oraons as the hated 'other'. Like the Christian mission they also have a broader 'civilising mission'. They looked at many of the customs and traditions of the adivasis as 'uncivilised' and understood these as 'Jungle Hinduism' (Savage Hinduism). They have contempt for the local healing practices. They projected Hindi as 'language' of Hindus' against the local dialect. They found that the main obstacle to the Hindutva ideology is Church and thus they projected Christianity as part of a global conspiracy to subjugate the Hindus. RSS propagated that the unity of Hindus against Muslims and Christians was essential to protect the Hindus and the 'Hindu nation'.

Taking clue from the Christian mission they also came out into social services network and established a bio-medical facility to attract the Hinduised adivasis they have already a network of schools- Saraswati Shishu Mandir under the umbrella of Vidya Bharti.

Exploiting the resentment of Ratiya Kanwar and other Hindu groups against the growing material prosperity of Christian Oraons, they struck a sympathetic chord among these groups. With the help of some sympathetic members of Ratiya Kanwar groups, they identified two point of tension:

- i) Liquor related disputes
- ii) Land related disputes

Like most of the tribal regions, liquor is an important component of the local society and culture. *Daru* or *arkhi* is the local name of the country made liquor produced through Mahua flowers (*bassica latifolia*). It is an important ritual, medicinal and social necessity of the entire village. It is offered to the deities and used in healing practices. Significantly, the bulk of production and sale are in the hands of the Oraons while the bulk of customers and consumers are Hindu adivasis. Like other parts of India the higher social groups do not produce liquor, they only consume it. Against popular perception, the income obtained through the sale of liquor is not substantial but the monopoly over production and sale of liquor served as a triggering point of social tension. The fact remains that the growing prosperity of the Oraons rests on the wages carried by the Oraons from construction sites in Korba and elsewhere. Cash earned from sale of liquor and wages have helped the Oraon purchase substantial cultivable land or obtaining it through mortgage transactions. On the other hand the Christian mission never put a blanket ban on production, sale and consumption of liquor on religious ground. It was only excessive drinking that was propagated as 'unchristian' by the missionaries. Before the advent of the Oraons there used to be a government run liquor shop but it could not cope with the competitive rates of liquor produced by the Oraons and hence shutdown. In order to minimise the dependence on the liquor produced by the Oraons, some Hindu adivasis took up the production of liquor but it was largely meant for the ritual and medical purposes. The practice of purchasing it from the Oraons for daily use continued.

Another point of tension is the procurement of Mahua flowers for the production of liquor. Since most of the land is owned by the Hindu adivasis, especially the Ratiya Kanwars, most of the mahua trees are owned by them. Because of traditional economic obligations the bulk of mahua flowers are sold to the local shopkeepers and not to the Oraons directly who are obliged to purchase it from the local market on higher rates. Attempt was also made by the RSS activists to discourage the Hindu adivasis from consuming liquor as it was detrimental to their economic interests. In the process, they took the risk of losing support since liquor consumption was an integral part of their culture. However, it was largely ignored.

When other arguments forwarded by the RSS activists did not cut much ice with the Hindu adivasis they were told that the Christians have a hidden agenda of acquiring all Hindu land through sale of liquor. Under the pressure of RSS activists the Hindu adivasis demanded their land sold to the Oraons back, leave the village and go to Manpur (an adjoining town) to live with their 'fathers'. The Oraons were threatened that all the material luxuries purchased by them, such as TV sets, through sale of liquor would be snatched or smashed. The crux came when the Oraons were told that if they wished to live in the village they should stop going to church and worship in Hindu temple. The Oraons were terrorised.

The RSS activists further unfolded the Hindutva agenda by fabricating a new ethno-religious identity as part of the larger nationalist concern. For the first time in a meeting the Oraons were referred to as 'Christians'. It never happened before. They were always referred to as 'Oraons.'

Thus, the pre-existing local tensions provided the local RSS activists with a convenient platform which strategically extend to the Hindutva ideology of RSS. Local tensions increased with the increased frequency of RSS 'training meetings' where the youth of Hindu adivasis are taught Hindutva ideology. The projection of Hindu adivasis as 'true Hindu' and to bring them into the 'Hindu mainstream' added a new dimension to tribal identity. Moreover, emphasis on 'Hinduness' of adivasis creates a sort of 'imagined community'.

Land related disputes and conflicts constitute another point of tension. Any organisation or individual can assert its' role only on the basis of its credibility. RSS, through assistance in bio-medical treatment, education and enforcement of accountability of local level state officials has endeared itself to the local Hindu community. Extension of bio-medical assistance and education reduced the dependence of Hindu adivasis on mission services. But taking up the issue of harassment and corruption on the part of lower level bureaucracy helped and empowered them. This gave weight to the voice of the RSS activists.

Ratiya Kanwar enjoyed special rights and entitlements being the original and earliest settlers as per local traditions. They dominated the local society through possession of agricultural and forest land. That in why land tension evolved into central 'conflict symbols' and this was used intelligently by the RSS to transmit Hindutva.

The ecological conditions are such that nobody in the village can survive on agricultural income alone. The vagaries of nature and low productivity play an important role in the local scenario. The Hindu adivasis earn their livelihood

through agriculture—mainly paddy cultivation and collection of seasonal *tendu* leaves used in *bidi* making which does not provide them much cash. On the other hand, the Oraons cultivate whatever little land they have, produce and sell liquor and involve in wage labour in construction sites in the nearby towns. Thus, they are more hard working and enterprising. Though as original settlers Ratiya Kanwars have the first right to clear land and make it cultivable, they have not exploited this entitlement to the extent they should have. On the contrary they have been selling or mortgaging their land to the Oraons. They have not forgotten that when the Oraons emigrated to this village they were poor and had nothing in their hands but within three decades they attained more prosperity than their Hindu hosts. The steady acquisition of land by the Oraons created resentment and jealousy among the Ratiya Kanwars.

As original settler the Ratiya Kanwars are obliged to perform certain rituals on behalf of the village to propitiate the local deity. Though Oraons are exempt from participation in these rituals, they are expected to participate and contribute. The Oraons sometimes reluctantly participate but refuse to join in frequent *pujas* because they have their own god. It reinforces the Oraons' outsider status and amplifies cultural distance. The RSS took full advantage of this situation and espoused the call for 'son of the soil' to deprive the Oraons' of their hard earned prosperity. Thus, they are taking advantage of cleavage between the Hindu and Christian adivasis. They have successfully created an 'enemy' for the Ratiya Kanwar and carved out a political constituency for their agenda through sustained engagement in civic activism. When the news of violence against tribals of Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and other adjoining states reach the village through mass media the Oraons become terror struck but they have not left the village yet and continue to make compromises to buy peace.

3.6.4 Conclusion

The present study is concerned with 'religious division' and 'conflict' in the context of the rise of Hindu nationalism. An area which had remained largely unstudied is the impact of the religious movements in tribal communities. This work examines this in the monograph.

3.7 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

This work advances our understanding with reference to the dynamism of religion. The book shows that livelihood and economic advantage is used as a factor in creating communal tensions. It was possible because the prosperity of Christian Oraons had upset the existing configuration of social relatives and hierarchies. The book shows how religion works in a tribal community, which are formally regarded as closed and unchanging ideas that are wrong.

3.8 SUMMARY

The two ethnographies discussed in this unit have a number of common and uncommon points with reference to religious assertion and political use of religion. Yet the main point of difference is that in the Iran's context their religion was not in conflict with any other religion but in the Indian context the other religion and

its' followers were demonised and through the 'politics of hatred' created the 'other' as enemy and pursued its' political agenda.

References

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Sample Questions

- 1) Discuss the religious dispute in Iran.
- 2) Discuss the cause of religious and social conflict in Mohanpur.

