

Jharkhand Yet Another Method to Oppress Adivasis

The Jharkhand Assembly has passed the Freedom of Religion Bill 2017 in August. It has received immediate assent from the Governor. Though it is named as Freedom of Religion Act, it aims to curb the so-called forcible conversions. In the context of Jharkhand, it targets Christian adivasi people only to disguise its real attack on the lives of adivasis.

Previously many state governments enacted laws with the aim of curbing forcible conversions, Odisha in 1967, Madhya Pradesh in 1968 and Arunachal Pradesh in 1978. Tamil Nadu enacted a law in 1979 in the name of Prohibition of forcible Conversions of Religious Act, but it was repealed in 2004. By and large these enactments are neutral. The government of Arunachal Pradesh did not frame the rules required for the implementation of the Act making it ineffective all these years.

Such laws enacted after 2000 have a definite agenda. The Freedom of Religion Acts were passed by Gujarat in 2002, Rajasthan and Haryana in 2006. Most of these states have areas that fall under the 5th Schedule of Indian Constitution, which is meant to protect the interests of adivasis, particularly from land alienation. These laws have provisions for prior permission to be obtained by a person who wants to convert along with stricter punishment for the offence that was made cognisable and non-bailable.

The Jharkhand added prior intimation to the district magistrate of the purification ceremony and enhanced punishment for the offence, i.e., imprisonment up to three years and a fine of Rs.50,000. It has also loosely defined for the first time the term indigenous faith. All this provided ample scope for the harassment and political manipulation.

Frequent placating of religious conversions into an emotional issue had been resorted to by the RSS-BJP combine to create a feeling of erosion of space and consequent insecurity among the followers of Hindu faith so that it can be utilised as a fertile ground for their political agenda. Every time when the issue of religious conversions was raked up by these forces, it was the adivasi people that had been targeted. It holds true for the enactment of Jharkhand. The full page spread advertisements in the press released by the state government on the eve of enactment makes it clear that the law intends to suppress all the adivasis. Incidentally, the ad claimed that M K Gandhi opposed the forcible conversion of *dalits* and *vanavasis* by the Christian missionaries. They don't care to say when the Gandhi said this. But the words dalits and vanavasis are not in vogue, at least in the political jargon, at the time when Gandhi was alive.

Adivasi communities in Jharkhand are facing many issues pertaining to their very existence. But, the religious conversions into Christianity are being blown out of proportions. Even after a more than a century of the arrival of Christian missionaries in Jharkhand, there are four per cent of christians among the adivasi population in the state. Of course, there are some divergences and prejudices between Christian and non-christian adivasis. The ruling classes want to deepen this divide by projecting the issue as a burning one as if it needs legislation.

The formation of the state of Jharkhand on the premise that it would bring development of adivasi people did not fructify. Jharkhand was made into a happy hunting ground for the imperialist finance capital and Indian big bourgeoisie to quench their never satiating thirst for profits. The rich mineral resources of iron and coal are being looted by them by taking away *jal*, *jungle* and *jameen* from the adivasis, destroying their livelihoods.

The adivasi people unitedly resisted this drive to dispossess them of land, water and forest. Religious affiliations did not deter their fight. To deny the adivasis any legal claim, the government amended the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act of 1908 (CNT) and Santhal Paragana Tenancy act (SPT) of 1949. Earlier, the lands of adivasi people were being taken away through fraudulent methods by the non-adivasis. These Acts restricted transfer of land from adivasis to non-adivasis and put an end to land alienation. The adivasi people agitated against these amendments. In this struggle, the Christian adivasis played a prominent role.

Because of availability of educational opportunities through the activities of Christian missionaries, the Christian adivasis are ahead of non-Christians both in education and public employment. Their more representation in the government employment due to reservations for STs, was being shown as though they are taking the jobs away from the non-Christians. The fact of the matter is that even today the recruitment for government jobs fall short of the quota stipulated for the STs. Yet the ruling class politicians used this to divide the adivasi people. The RSS-BJP combine used to be more vociferous in this regard with the aim to deepen wedge between the Christian and non-Christian adivasis. Yet when the question of dispossessing of their land and forest came to the fore, they joined hand and participated in the movements overcoming this division.

Exactly to break this unity among the adivasis and weaken their struggle against land grabbing by the government to give it to the big capital, the ruling classes have enacted the so called Freedom of Religion Act in 2017.
