

## **Identity Politics over Mother Mary's Attire**

Joseph Marianus Kujur  
HOD, Tribal Studies  
Indian Social Institute

It is over two months since the controversy regarding the tribal attire of Mother Mary hit the headlines in Ranchi, the hub of politics in Jharkhand. Every time the matter seemed to have been resolved for good, rallies and demonstrations kept the fires burning. While efforts continued to diffuse the tension between the Oraon Sarna and the Church, it only kept escalating. What started with a protest by a small faction has become bigger due to mobilization of various Sarna groups. Surprisingly, political parties have not openly made any statement or expressed their opinion on the issue. This silence, however, should not be interpreted as the absence of politics in the whole affair.

Some sections of the Oraon Sarna community claim that the red border saree is their 'traditional attire' and that dressing Mother Mary, a lady with a foreign origin with it, hurts their religious sentiments. Their argument is that the tribal looks of Mother Mary will encourage conversions from the Sarna religion. They also claim that 100 years from now tribals will think of Mother Mary as a tribal because of her dress and this will facilitate many more conversions.

The critics of the above line of thought rubbish the apprehensions and argue that the 'modern' Oraons clad in the Western costumes (pants & shirts) even 66 years after the departure of the colonizers, do not look like British. The Church authorities argue that the tribal Christians are as much tribals as the Sarna tribals and that they have equal right over the red border saree. The Church also claims it is a simple issue made complicated by the "vested interests" that are apparently indulging in triggering the religious passion of certain sections of the community to suit their political purpose and to divert the attention of public at large from the main issues of development, land alienation, deforestation, rampant mining and industrialization, corruption and plundering of the local resources.

In fact, the protests, demonstrations, claims and counter claims, dialogue and its failure, present a very good site for identity perception and articulation. It also manifests the way people and groups perceive themselves and others. The perception of identity is very much conditioned by the situations—social, economic, political and cultural. These perceptions and articulations are prone to be manipulated by insiders and outsiders equally, depending upon the context. However, there are some questions which need to be answered to analyze the present crisis in Jharkhand: Who constitutes the Oraon community? Are non-Sarna Oraons, viz. Oraon Christians, not Oraons just because they are Christians? If the Oraon Christians continue to be Oraons despite their religious diversification, what is the problem if they own up the Oraon culture in its internal make up and external manifestations? If there is such homogeneity in the Oraon society, why is it that the migrant Oraons in Assam and the Andaman Islands are not considered as 'Scheduled Tribes' by the State? What is the religion of the Oraons practicing traditional religion—the Sarna or the Oraon because there are as many tribal religions as there are tribes and the Oraon is one of those tribes. The Oraon is an ethnic category practicing the Oraon religion. Is the red border saree an essential element of the Oraon culture without which the Oraon culture and identity cannot survive? In that case, what is the historicity of the red border saree in the Oraon community? In Bolivia, not many years ago, one of the 'tribes' claimed that its flag was 'traditional' for centuries. The critics, however, said that flag was 'invented' only a few years ago primarily to use it as a symbol for

political mobilization and identity assertion. What is identity? Is it static, stagnant, permanent and immutable?

I think to perceive and articulate culture and identity as fixed, permanent and immutable is a result of false consciousness. The red border saree is surely a part of the Oraon culture but to reduce the entire Oraon identity to one small external element of culture is a denial of temporality and agency to the subject, both Sarna and Christian. This essentialist approach which understands culture and identity in terms of primordiality is problematic as it negates fluidity, porousness and mutability of culture and identity. The Oraon communities of Jharkhand, whether Sarna or Christian, share the same history of migration, sojourn and settlement in the Chotanagpur region. They share the same geography, worldview, philosophy and cultural ethos. They have the same kinship structure, festivals, signs and symbols, rites and rituals barring a few.

When some Oraons decided to convert to Christianity in Chotanagpur some 160 years ago, a new community of Oraon Christians emerged. The community practiced Christianity in and through the Oraon culture even while including some new elements from the Christian faith. There were continuous dialogue and negotiation between the old and the new. The process of inculturation which basically experiences and manifests Christian faith in the Oraon culture is responsible for the present crisis. However, this process is nothing new. This has been happening in the case of the Hinduisation of the tribes across the country. The same process was and is still at work across the world--in North America, South America, Africa, Australia and in Asia.

Various studies reveal that many Oraons practicing their traditional faith converted to Christianity for three reasons—social, economic and spiritual. Some of the converts embraced Christianity because they were ostracized from the Oraon community for some mishaps in the village for their alleged practice of witchcraft. Excommunication in an Oraon context is a virtual death thereby cutting the ostracized family off completely from the rest of the community. This social situation compelled many to find an alternate identity in Christianity. In some cases economic reason was primarily responsible for change in religious affiliation of the Oraons. Various churches engaged in philanthropic activities—education, health care and development being the primary ones. The converts or Christians got priority in the Christian institutions. The spiritual reason is often cited as the main cause of the shift in the religious affiliation of the Sarna Oraons. However, no one reason can be given prominence for a change in the religious beliefs. Oftentimes it is a combination of multiple factors resulting in the change of religions. In some case studies it has also been noticed that the three causes above do not come into the picture at all and the change of religion is only due to marriage alliances.

In spite of a rupture in the relationship between the Sarna and the Christian, they had been fighting for the common cause of the Jharkhand separate state. They have also been fighting for their rights together for their empowerment and development.

The present divide therefore rather than helping the larger tribal society in general and the Oraon community in particular, is doing the greatest damage to them. Firstly, it is diverting the attention of the Oraons and other marginalized communities from the main issues. Tribal communities do not gain anything from this controversy. The only beneficiaries of this controversy are the communal forces in nexus with the land, timber and other mafias. Secondly, this event is an example of brazen and desperate communalization of Mother Mary's tribal looks for polarizing the communities before the forthcoming elections.

This escalation of tension which at first instance may look like religious has nothing to do with religion. It is simply a political stunt of the vested interests who want to divide and rule the tribal community on the basis of religion. There is politics of identity. The statue of Mother Mary has become a site of identity politics thereby negating tribal identity to the Church in Jharkhand. There is a manipulation and monopolization of Indigeneity. The fear that 100 years from now people will consider Mother Mary in the tribal costume as a tribal and this will trigger conversions, is only hypothetical. The red border saree is a small part of the larger Oraon identity. There is a mixing up of the total identity with a small part of the identity which is highly problematic. It should be noted that the Oraons do not have a written tradition as in Hinduism, Islam and Christianity which are established religions. The Oraons still have the oral tradition and if the red border saree is their tradition, it is the same for the Sarna and Christian communities as they have the same history and ancestry. They share the same culture and worldview. Except for the religious diversification all the other cultural elements are the same. Hence, to reduce the identity in its entirety to merely religious identity is a gross flaw even in identity politics. The Oraon religion is known to be tolerant, harmonious, accommodating, peace loving and if one sights elements of hatred, communalism, disharmony and divisiveness in it, there is an alarming sign that external divisive forces have infiltrated the Oraon community, which can result only in destruction. It is however not too late to be conscious of the external threats and start reasserting their common origin and history all over again for a better and brighter future. For such a thing to happen there is no other option but to jointly fight for their development, empowerment and rights.

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