

**Sarbeswar Sahoo, *Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India***

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. xviii + 205 pages, endnotes, bibliography and index. \$99.00 (hardcover). ISBN 9781108416122 (hardcover).

The work under review is a rich and well written examination into the historical and contemporary worlds of Pentecostals in Rajasthan, a state in the western part of North India. These Pentecostals are part of the Bhil people, one of India's tribal groups. Most of the population of Rajasthan has a very strong "Rajput Hindu(tva) ideology" and so Christianity has flourished among tribal people who have found themselves on the fringes of mainstream Hindu society. The study takes as its guiding themes two salient realities of Pentecostalism in much of India today: conversion and religious violence. It shows how the two are linked, not in some facile causal way, but through the minds, motivations, and behaviors of Indian Christian missionaries, Christian converts, and their religious and political opponents.

The monograph consists of an Introduction, four chapters dealing with different aspects of Pentecostalism, conversion and anti-Christian violence, and a Conclusion. The Introduction lays out the study's fundamental ideas. It locates anti-Christian violence in a larger historical context of religious or communal violence in India and shows how the former is a relatively recent phenomenon, beginning in 1997 and increasing since then. Pentecostals bear a disproportionate share of the violence meted out upon Christians—primarily by Hindu nationalists. Perhaps not coincidentally, Pentecostals are also known to be very active in conversion activities in many parts of the nation and the Introduction helpfully articulates the main issues regarding conversion in India. It then moves on to matters of methodology and field work, undertaken in Udaipur district.

Chapter 2 delves into the doctrines of Pentecostalism, which emphasizes the power of God the Holy Spirit. Then follows a brief history of the movement worldwide, in India, and finally in Rajasthan, where it was first introduced in the 1930s or 1940s, but really was planted on a permanent basis in the early 1960s by K. V. Phillip and T. V. Mathews, who were Pentecostal missionaries from Kerala. Mathews formed the Native Missionary Movement (NMM) in 1964, which recruited local Rajasthani tribal persons to be missionaries to their own people. Today there are over a dozen Pentecostal organizations and independent congregations working in the state, one of them being the Calvary Covenant Fellowship Mission (CCFM), which greatly assisted the author in his fieldwork. Pentecostalism among Bhils of Rajasthan (as in other parts of the world) emphasizes spirit worship; divine healings and miracles in the material, social and spiritual realms; strict rules of belief and practice; and social ministries such as education, counselling, medical assistance, and development and relief work. In India, conversion to Christianity by Dalit and Tribal groups has deep political ramifications, since a public declaration of a change of faith would deprive such converts of the benefits which come to them as members of traditionally oppressed classes of society.

Therefore, many tribal Christians do not state to government officials that they are Christians. However, Christian conversion “has created a new identity for tribals,” according to the author (46–47). This new identity is both social and internal/psychological, as Christian tribals “find their new-found identity empowering” (47).

Chapter 3 focuses on conversion. Rather than trying to develop a general theory or explanation of conversion to suit his context, the author here presents four perspectives and narratives of “differently situated actors” that are involved in the conversion process. The chapter opens with a review of the academic literature on religious conversion in India. One of the features of conversion to Christianity in India is that a majority (though certainly not all) of the converts to Catholicism, Protestantism and Pentecostalism come from Dalit, tribal and low caste backgrounds. This can be interpreted in many ways: for example, by Christians that their faith provides a refuge from social and material oppression, and by Hindu nationalists that missionaries lure people from marginal populations by promises of material and social gain. The four narratives or perspectives on conversion to Christianity that the author provides are, respectively, the Hindu nationalist narrative, the Christian (native) missionary narrative, the converts’ narrative, and the (Hindu) tribal narrative. The four narratives illuminate “how different actors/agents have assigned different meanings to the complex and controversial issue of religious conversion” (85), in which “the same theme of freedom, materiality and spirituality gets re-interpreted and reconceptualized differently by different groups” (86).

Chapter 4 focuses on tribal or *Adivasi* Pentecostal women. There are several reasons for this. First, the majority of Pentecostals are women. Second, they predominate in Pentecostal churches even though formal authority usually lies with men. Third, the reasons that they convert, and remain faithful to Pentecostalism, are gender specific. Indian Pentecostal women are certainly not unique in this respect, as worldwide the story is much the same. The chapter delves into women’s experiences of conversion, the role of miracles and faith healing among women, male-female interactions within the family and outside, and women’s socio-economic conditions as Pentecostals. In general, the author argues that women significantly benefit both socially and materially in the Pentecostal movement. However, this is not because missionaries or church leaders are dispensing special goods and favors to them, but because Pentecostalism positively changes women’s self-perceptions, their physical, mental, and emotional well-being, and their relationships to family members and to the broader society in which they live.

Chapter 5 explores anti-Christian violence in the context of *Hindutva* or Hindu nationalist political ascendancy. Hindu nationalists see conversion as a form of violence: “something that violates the very essence of an individual – in a sense it amounts to an outside ‘take over’ of the convert’s consciousness” (63). In this view, violence by agents of *Hindutva* is simply a retaliation against violence first perpetrated by missionizing religious agents—whether they be Muslim or Christian. After chronicling anti-Christian violence in Rajasthan since 1990, the chapter discusses the demographic situation of the Bhils of Rajasthan, and their socio-religious, economic, and political condition. It locates Christian presence and conversion as well as *Hindutva* ideology and activity as significant forces in the macro-analysis, both historical and social, of the state—what the author terms “the political economy of tribal society” (156). The Conclusion of the book brings together the main arguments of the work.

This study of Pentecostalism and its opponents among the Bhils of Rajasthan is a significant intervention in the social scientific study of the Indian subcontinent, as well

as the field of religious studies and the burgeoning area of Pentecostal studies worldwide. One minor criticism of the work is that it does not clearly state at the outset that Pentecostal missionaries are exclusively Indian. For the uninitiated, the term “missionary” almost immediately conjures up white men in pith helmets and white women in long dresses—a stereotype that certainly does not apply to this study. That being said, *Pentecostalism and Politics of Conversion in India* provides an academically rigorous, pleasantly accessible, and intellectually fascinating study of the political, religious, social, and economic lives of Pentecostals in Rajasthan, who surprisingly share quite a bit with their fellow Pentecostals around the world.

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