



Joshua Project: Religious Conversion and Separatism in Tribal Region of India

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Abstract: The project Joshua originated from deep concern for those yet to hear the message of Christianity, and its ongoing impact can be seen in the increased awareness of global missions, the provision of vital data of all Christian organizations, fundamentalist, believers work together for outreach efforts, the encouragement of collaborative work to increase believers. The link between religious conversions and political separatism in various states of India is shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts under the project Joshua. Additionally, the Joshua project has an educational impact, providing training and material to cultivate individual and communities to understand the importance of Christianity and population in the world for geopolitical existence. Every year, 24 lakh people are being converted to Christianity, according to the data available on the website of the Joshua Project, a Christian conversion “research” initiative. There are a total 2272 case groups of which 2041 are unreached as per their website.

Keywords: Joshua Project, Religious conversion, Christianity, Separatism, unreached people, tribal of India.

Seeding of separatism:

The seeding of separatism among tribal or Adivasi communities in India is a complex issue with deep historical, socio-political, and economic roots. Religious conversions and external influence have played a significant role in shaping separatist sentiments in tribal regions of India. This complex issue involves multiple factors, including identity, political control, social transformation, and external interventions.

The impact of Joshua Project is suffering in various ways. In the project, it has created a centralized database that compiles information on over 17,000 distinct people groups, detailing their demographics, languages, cultural practices, and the extent of their exposure to Christianity¹. This wealth of data enables mission strategists to prioritize their

efforts and deploy resources effectively to areas where they can start new narration and separatism.

Colonial policies of divide and rule, forced displacement, and economic exploitation have contributed to a sense of alienation and resentment among various communities in India. The displacement of tribal and marginalized populations from their lands and the creation of distinct identities among groups in regions like the Northeast and Kashmir have funded separatist movements. These historical injustices continue to influence contemporary political separatism in India (R. Robinson, 1998).

1. North-East India

The North-Eastern states, particularly **Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya**, and parts of **Manipur**, provide the most prominent examples of how religious conversions have influenced political separatism. The project Joshua launched in the late 1990s, with the aims to provide comprehensive data and resources to support churches, mission organizations, and individual believers in their outreach efforts. To understand the cultural sensitivity and contextualization in evangelism, missionaries with knowledge about the groups and initiated narratives for separatism (R. Trivedi, 2024).

A.Nagaland:

Conversion to Christianity: Nagaland saw large-scale conversions to Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, primarily due to the efforts of American Baptist missionaries. Today, over 90% of Nagaland's population is Christian, with the majority being Baptists. In Nagaland, the project cultivated narration of “quality of life” and connect the youth through “Empowering the youth”. Joshua Project aims to create sustainable development model that can be replicated in other areas. **Political Separatism:** The religious conversion to Christianity coincided with the rise of Naga nationalism. The **Naga National Council (NNC)**, founded in the



1940s, demanded an independent Naga nation, rooted in the distinct ethnic, cultural, and religious identity of the Nagas, who felt alienated from the predominantly Hindu and Muslim population of India. As Christianity took root in Nagaland, it became new paradigm through which many Nagas

associated with project. Their mission relies on first identifying real or imaginary fault lines within the various north east states and widen the divides to convert various ethnic identities into permanently warring groups (A. Shouries, 1994).

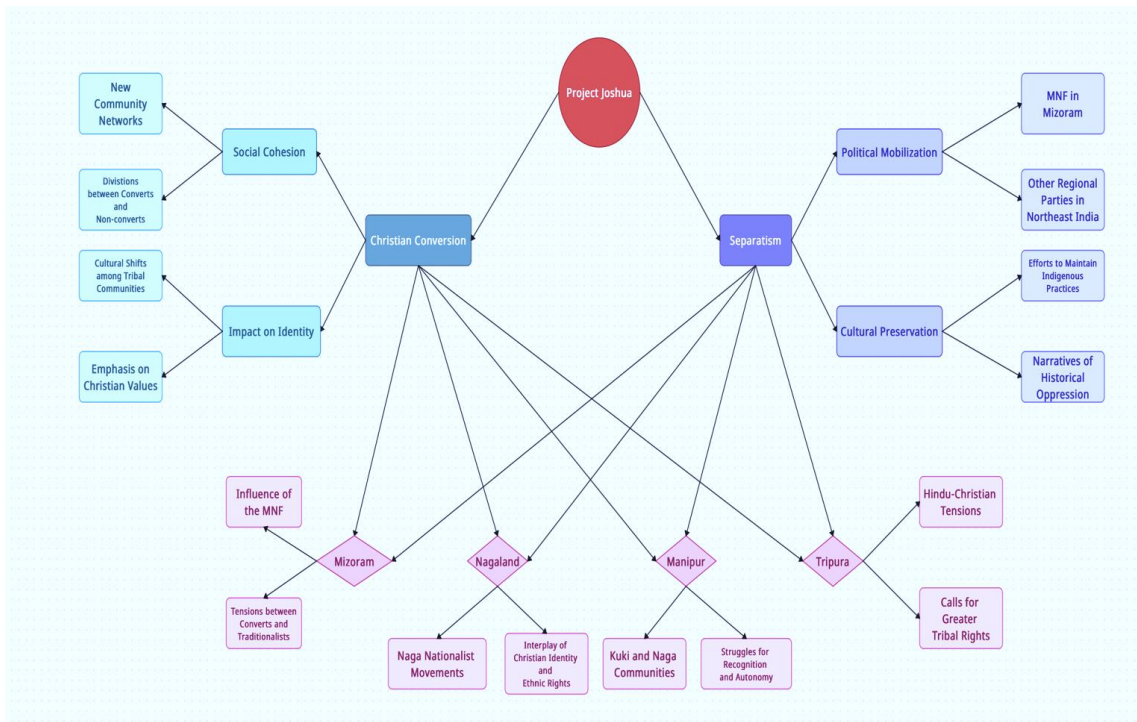


Fig.1: Neural Network Analysis of Joshua Project in North East India

Geographical or demographical hotspots of conversion, providing insights into why certain groups might be more receptive, this uncover strategic approaches. Through model it can identify Joshua project, missionaries or organisation with significant influences unstable the North-East region. By mapping conversion network, the model could help assess the social impact of missionaries for Christianity conversion.

Insurgent Groups: Separatist movements like the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), with its slogan "Nagaland for Christ," explicitly link their demands for independence with the preservation of Christian identity and tribal culture which quite resemblance to Joshua Project³. The NSCN has been one of the most active insurgent groups fighting for Naga sovereignty, with external support at various points from countries like Myanmar and China.

B. Mizoram

Conversion to Christianity: The Mizo people were heavily influenced by Christian missionaries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and today, over 85% of Mizoram's population is Christian, mostly Presbyterian. The presence of the Joshua project influences local identity dynamics (Fig.-1). As conversion rates increases, traditional Mizo cultural practices challenged, leading to concerns about exacerbate feeling of division and potentially fuel separatist sentiments.

Political Separatism: The conversion to Christianity played a key role in the identity formation of the Mizo people, who felt distinct from the Hindu-dominated Indian mainland. The Mizo National Front (MNF), under the leadership of Laldenga, led an insurgency for an independent Mizo nation, arguing that their distinct Christian faith, culture, and ethnicity set them apart from the Indian state. By framing external projects like the Joshua project as part of larger agenda that efficacious the separatist activities of community.



Outcome: After decades of conflict, the MNF signed a peace accord with the Indian government in 1986, resulting in the creation of the state of Mizoram. While the separatist movement was largely quelled, the cultural and religious distinction of the Mizo people remains strong. The Joshua project has influx of evangelical division creation among tribe and Christian tribe that leading to tensions that social cohesion. This division exacerbate feeling among converted and original tribe that potentially fostering separatist sentiments among community¹.

C. Meghalaya and Manipur

In **Meghalaya**, a majority of the tribal population, especially the Khasis and Garos, converted to Christianity under the influence of Welsh and American missionaries. These missionaries undertook extensive missionary work, which involved not only preaching of Christian doctrine but also build up narrations, created fault line for community separatism later on cultivated for breaking the state. These separatism farming nurture though provoking the demand for independence has not been as pronounced as in Nagaland or Mizoram, the **Khasi Students' Union** and other regional groups have demanded greater autonomy, often framing their identity in religious and ethnic terms. Joshua project shaped the religious landscape of Meghalaya with cultural narratives of separatism.

In **Manipur**, insurgent groups like the **United National Liberation Front (UNLF)** and the **National Socialist Council of Manipur** have sought independence or autonomy, influenced by both ethnic divisions and the Christian identity of certain tribal groups. In Manipur, many grassroots organizations and local churches have been influenced by the vision of the Joshua project through education and sustainable development programme. Their efforts not only to spread Christianity but also to develop separatism mindset among various local tribal community (R. E. Frykenberg, 2003).

2. Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh

In the tribal belt of **Jharkhand** and **Chhattisgarh**, conversions to Christianity have contributed to identity-based movements and demands for greater autonomy. In Jharkhand, people are being lured with the promise getting housing under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. It is said that out of 250 houses in Meral village of Gumla district, 150 have converted to Christianity. Alongside Pradhan MatriAwasYojna, the missionaries are providing jobs to the gullible people. For each cast group, an

agent is appointed across the country, those who converted to Christianity claimed to have received a financial assistance after going to church².

A. Conversion, Tribal Identity and Grabbing the Land

Adivasi (tribal) communities in these regions have long been marginalized and exploited by the non-tribal population, often leading them to convert to Christianity as a form of resistance against social oppression and economic exploitation. Christian missionaries provided education, healthcare, and a sense of empowerment that the state often failed to deliver. Conversion also led to a sense of distinctiveness from the dominant Hindu culture (Patel, V.N. 2017). In many cases, these converted tribal groups sought to assert their unique identity, leading to political mobilization for the protection of tribal rights and resources. The Catholic Institution in Jashpur preaching in Jashpur for last thirty years, by converting the tribal people under Joshua Project, grabbing the land of innocent tribal for construction of churches. The Joshua project started in 1990s, till now thousands of acer of land is encroached by missionaries and institutions where father and nun are living, constructed schools, hostels and showing community engagement under interplay of faith and diverting tribal for separatism^{4,5}.

B. Demand for Separate Statehood

The demand for a separate state of Jharkhand (carved out of Bihar in 2000) was driven by tribal leaders who sought to preserve their cultural and religious identity, which was distinct from the Hindu-majority population of Bihar⁷. While the movement was primarily rooted in ethnic and linguistic identity, religious conversion played a role in framing the tribal demand for autonomy. Similar movements in Chhattisgarh, also carved out of Madhya Pradesh in 2000, reflected tribal aspirations for greater political control over their resources, with religious conversion adding another layer to the already complex identity politics. Overall, Joshua Project and communities demand become synergic and developed a challenges for state and all citizens.

3. Odisha

Odisha has witnessed significant religious tensions due to conversions, especially in the **Kandhamal district**, where a large portion of the tribal population has converted to Christianity⁶.

A. Religious Tensions and Violence

The **Kandhamal riots** in 2008 were a result of growing tensions between the converted Christian



tribal population and the Hindu population, fueled by accusations that Christian missionaries were fostering separatism and undermining the traditional tribal culture. The violence left many dead and displaced thousands of people. In response to the communal tensions created by missionaries, need of fostering interfaith dialogue, Joshua project emerged as a grassroots initiative aiming to promote more communal separatism and creates more cracks (A. Misra, 2011).

Hindu community, have claimed that conversions to Christianity are part of a larger narration to create a "separate Christian state" and have organized campaigns for **GharWapsi** (reconversion to Hinduism) to counter this perceived threat. But this concept misrepresented among the media and started new narratives against Adivasi are differ than hindu. This riots leading to long-lasting trauma and distrust among communities which fulfil the efforts of Joshua project.

B. Political Mobilization

The Christian tribals in Odisha have often aligned themselves with political movements demanding greater tribal rights and autonomy. While separatism is not as pronounced as in the North-East, the underlying religious tension has contributed to political mobilization around issues of tribal welfare, identity, and rights. Christian political mobilization occurs through alliances aim to create broader platform to address social justice, land rights and development issues, enhancing their political clout. During election, persons from Joshua project and Christian activists groups mobilize votes to support candidates and parties that align with Christian faith as priorities (Ward. K., 2009). Under Joshua project, Christian organisations engage in advocacy social issues such as education, health-care, and poverty alleviation. By framing these issues within a political context, they aim to untablilise the state damage the tribal community.

4. Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat

In states like **Madhya Pradesh** and **Gujarat**, religious conversions have created a sense of cultural alienation among tribal groups, leading to political tensions.

A. Tribal Conversions and Hindu Nationalism

In Madhya Pradesh, the Bhil and Gond tribes have seen conversions to Christianity, which has led to tensions with Hindu nationalist organizations that claim such conversions threaten the Hindu social fabric. In Gujarat, particularly in the Rural Surat and Vadodara, Dangs and Tapi district, conversions to Christianity have been met with strong 80%

converted. The district Tapi has 90% conversion whereas Dang has 80% conversion in Christianity. Hindu nationalist organizations accuse Christian missionaries of trying to create a "Christian belt" in tribal areas, which they claim undermines national unity. Jabua is the most affected region of Madhya Pradesh where Christian missionaries established schools, vocational training centres and nursing schools where mass conversion activities are operated by pastors and nuns. The agents are provided seal stamps and literature to propagate Christianity are paid Rs. 1500 for getting people married to Christian and Rs. 2000 for conversion⁴. Social media likes and sharing Rs. 500, then there are priests who reported to "father" and have fixed salaries. They are appointed as head of some school and hospital to provide them Rs. 1 lakh as monthly salary. The main job of these priests is to clear any obstruction arising in conversion activities.

B. Political Ramifications

While outright separatist movements are not prominent in these states, religious conversions have created divisions within tribal communities. These divisions are often exploited by political parties for electoral gain, with Hindu nationalist parties positioning themselves as protectors of the "national culture" against the "foreign influence" of Christianity (Dave, J.K., 2013). Missionaries under Joshua project creates social dynamics that alter the Adivasi and Christian Adivasi in Dang, Baswada, Tapi, Palghar region of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and Rajasthan. As Christianity gains tractions, it may lead to the emergence of identity politics within Bhil Pradesh, where tribal community influence political alliance and party politics with newly converted and appointed Christian leaders. This Christian leaders or social movements gain support from newly converted populations or those who are under the influence of Christian missionaries, thus Joshua project changing the political landscape of these regions.

C. Demand for Separate Statehood

The Bhil Pradesh movement is a part of Joshua project which advocating for the rights and recognition of the Bhil tribal community of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan. These movements emerged with Joshua Project related to land rights, political representation with central demands of the **Bhil Pradesh**, a separate state or autonomous region for Bhil community. The interconnection of both Bhil Pradesh movement and Joshua Project is aim to elevate the status of Bhil



community and advocating their rights for separatism.

5. Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

In the **Scheduled Tribes of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana**, religious conversions have not led to significant separatist movements, but they have contributed to local political dynamics. The Joshua project, an initiative that seeks to fabricate tribal communities in India, specifically in state like Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Christianity, adapted to local cultural norms and festivals. For instance, Christian festivals, such as Christmas and Easter, are celebrated with local customs and in the Telugu language⁹. This increase the influence in politics, Christian institutions and communities especially in regions with significant increase Christian populations. Some churches in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana feature unique architectural style that incorporate local designs and motifs. Additionally, Christian missionaries using regional cultural elements like traditional Telugu music and dance to attract tribal population. This cultural adaptation seeding separatism, development of new religion belief, and create social fabrication for discrimination of tribal and Christian tribal.

A. Conversion and Social adaptation

Tribals in these states have converted to Christianity largely due to the promise of social upliftment and escape from economic exploitation. However, this has not translated into organized separatist movements, as the primary focus of these groups remains local socio-economic issues rather than political autonomy (C M Bauman, 2013). The influence of Project Joshua is notable in regions where Christian population have increased. This impact extended to shifts in social dynamics, as the presence of new faith-based communities can create both support networks and tensions with existing religious and cultural groups.

B. Social conflict:

Original tribal community have raised concerns about religious conversions in tribal regions of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, accusing Christian missionaries of creating divisions within the tribal community. However, these tensions have largely remained local and have not escalated into broader separatist movements. Project Joshua has faced scrutiny and opposition from local tribal groups and political organisation in both states, which argue that such projects may useful for social services as a means to encourage religious conversion. They claim that the project may disrupt traditional

community structures and religious practices, particularly among tribal and rural populations.

Conclusion

Shockingly, the conversion rate in India is 3.9% while the global average is 2.6%. So far, the Joshua Project has reached 6 crore people, with 4 out of 100 people converting to Christianity. The link between religious conversions, political separatism varies across different regions of India and Joshua Project realised alarms about conversion-separatism activities in India. In some states, like Nagaland and Mizoram, conversions to Christianity have contributed directly to separatist movements by fostering distinct cultural and religious identities. In other states, like Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha, conversions have added a layer of complexity to tribal political mobilization, though outright separatism is less pronounced. The perception of conversions as a threat to national unity leading to social tensions and, in some cases, violence. The interaction between religion, identity, and politics remains a potent force in shaping the aspirations and struggles of India's tribal populations. The evangelical Christians will get fully support for financially thorough individuals, business, churches economy, healthcare sectors, education sectors along with foreign immigration for Indian tribal people.

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