

A Conviction to Dissent: Reinterpreting Mass Conversion at Meenakshipuram

By Gavin Irby

In the summer of 1981, the *Indian Express* reported on an incident that was to spark a nationwide debate: one hundred and eighty formerly untouchable families in the state of Tamilnadu converted to Islam. On a story that had been running in the South Indian press for months, they gave the following account under the sensational headline, “A Whole Village Goes Islamic:”

One February 19th a function was arranged with all pomp and show at Meenakshipuram. About 4,000 Muslims from neighboring Tenkasi, Kadyanallur, Vadakari, Vavanagaram and other places participated in the conversion ceremony with their families. Mr. Shahul Hameed, MLA Kadayanallur, took an active part.

The entire village wore a festive look. The *Salath* (Prayer) started with *Fazar* (sunrise prayer) followed by *Zuhar Azar* and *Maquarib* at 1 p.m., 4-30 p.m. and 6-40 p.m., respectively with all the congregation reciting the *Kalima*. Most of the Harijans were seen tonsured, and some sported well-groomed beards. After they repeated the *Kalima* and prayed to Allah by kneeling down towards the west the stage was set for their marriages anew [sic] according to Islamic rites. The Muslim women who had come to attend the function went into the houses of the Harijans and brought the women to the maidan. All of them were bathed and dressed in the best clothes and their heads covered in Islamic style. With the Moulvi reciting from the Koran, the marriages were reviewed and signature obtained from everyone who turned to Islam.

This was followed by a feast. The converts were promised a mosque, Arabic school, burial ground and so on. On March 4, Mr. Abdul Samad, MP., laid the foundation stone for a mosque.¹

¹ Quoted in Seshadri, H.V. *Warning of Meenakshipuram* (Bangalore: Jagarana Prakashana, 1981): 2.

Another round of conversions, this time some fifty families, occurred on May 23rd with wide media coverage. A small mosque, which was no more than a 10x30' shed, was built and a bore-well drilled in the evenings.

An epiphenomenon of this event, which was followed by several more mass conversions, was the response of Hindu revivalist organizations. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) staged protest marches in the nearby town of Panpoli.² Abdul Mujahid, in his book on the conversions, notes that after the events at Meenakshipuram:

The revivalist mobilization gained momentum in an all-India rally called Virat Hindu Sammelan, held on October 18, 1981 in Delhi and attended by 800,000 persons “mostly middle class.” A confederation of all major Hindu organizations, named Vishva Hindu Parishad, formed branches all over India and has become the major revivalist group in India today.³

Revivalist mobilization resulted in a number of communal clashes, first in Tamilnadu. On March 1, 1982 there was a riot in Kanyakumari, targeting Christians, who resisted the propaganda and demonstrations performed by revivalist outsiders. The first major Muslim-Hindu riot took place on June 1982 in Puliangudi. In 1981 and 1982 there were thirty-seven communal riots, as compared to the biannual average of eight.⁴

My purpose in referring to these events is not to draw a direct causal connection between the mass conversion at Meenakshipuram and subsequent communal rioting (According to the Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, there were conversions every year from 1969-1978⁵) but to point out that they took place in an environment where the contestation of religious identity was not an idle concern. It could, in fact, be a matter of life and death.

Given this information, the purpose of this article is to ask: How are we as scholars supposed to understand conversion? What role does belief play? What role does politics play? Is conversion a matter of conviction or protest? And finally, given the numerous and often

² Khan, Mumtaz Ali. *Mass-Conversions of Meenakshipuram: A Sociological Enquiry* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1983): 50.

³ Mujahid, Abdul Malik. *Conversion to Islam: Untouchables' Strategy for Protest in India* (Chambersburg: Anima Publications, 1989): 94.

⁴ Mujahid, 94.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

contradictory accounts in conversion narratives, what is the best way to go about organizing and understanding them? To do this, I will be looking at the reporting done in the Indian Express, as well as several books written about the conversions by Muslim, Christian, and Hindu authors.

Before delving too deeply into these issues, however, it will be helpful to provide a more detailed background into Meenakshipuram itself. Despite my allusions to widespread communal riots, this is a local narrative rooted in local politics and communal relations. It is easy for scholars to get lost in grand theories in order to explain ultimate causes, ignoring the significance of local interpretations. As Paul Brass points out in his excellent book on communal violence, “The constructions that become officially or broadly accepted are usually far removed from the actual precipitating incidents and from local interpretations of them.”⁶

At this time in Meenakshipuram, which is a small hamlet in the Tirunelveli district of Tamilnadu, untouchables made up about sixteen percent of the total population, while making up eighty percent of the rural population.⁷ The converts were almost exclusively of the Pallar *jati*, who constitute the majority of untouchables in this district. The majority of non-Brahmin caste Hindus were of the Thevar *jati*, mostly agricultural laborers and roughly equivalent to the Pallars in terms of economic status. Despite this economic parity, or likely because of it, there was a history of antagonism between the two groups. Untouchables were made, for example, to remove their shoes and dismount from bicycles when traveling through Thevar villages. They were also not allowed to draw water from public sources and frequently complained of prejudice at the hands of the police (who were frequently Thevars).

Abdul Mujahid points out in his study that violence against untouchables is frequently a reaction against perceived assertiveness on the part of the untouchable community – especially those who are aware of their rights and resort to legal means to protect them. He notes, “All the instances of collective atrocities investigated by the commissioner [for scheduled castes tribes] in 1977-1978 and 1979 have one thing in common: assertiveness and the resistance of untouchable individuals and communities against wrongs done them.”⁸ This results in a two-fold problem for untouchables: Not only does the assertion of their rights often result in violent reaction among

⁶ Brass, Paul. *Theft of an Idol: Text and Context in the Representation of Collective Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997): 5.

⁷ This is based on the 1971 census.

⁸ Mujahid, 33.

caste Hindus but the legal apparatus that they must resort to is often in the hands of the very communities that they are seeking protection from:

Whenever untouchables assert their rights, they not only have to confront the dominant caste but most of the time they have to face the local government apparatus as well, especially the person who writes the First Information Report. This report is the most crucial document in the Indian judicial system. It is normally written by a low-ranked, semi-ignorant policeman who is subject to all kinds of manipulation, corruption, and the pressures of nepotism. The police officer, in this setting, is not usually the neutral arbiter of social disputes but the armed representative of the communities from which either he was originally recruited, or to whom he is responsive.⁹

Although the mass conversion was reported in the news as a strange and sudden event, new converts reported that they had actually considered conversion as a community three times before. They did not follow through with it, however, because they were unable to achieve any kind of unanimity on the decision. So what caused this change? Was there some immediate cause that stimulated universal support for the decision to convert? Was it simply the result of initiative on the part of the untouchable community? Mujahid comments:

But there also had been a history of untouchable assertiveness, of Thevars' oppressive treatment, and of conflict in which the police supported the Thevars. The murder of two Thevars in December 1980 (two months before the conversion) brought a new wave of police torture and harassment for the untouchables of the village. This situation caused the untouchables to adopt a collective strategy. Their exposure to Islam was mainly through social contact with the Muslims of the area, who had been a political power in this electoral constituency for at least forty years. This conversion came as a collective decision of converts, albeit in three installments.¹⁰

The Muslims that they contacted were members of the South India Isha-Athul Islam Sabai in Tirunelveli, which was established in 1944 to assist new converts, publish pamphlets, and

⁹ Ibid., 44.

¹⁰ Ibid., 55.

perform conversions.¹¹ Initially reluctant, they eventually agreed to take responsibility for the mass conversion at Meenakshipuram.

The Muslims of the South deserve specific mention because they have a somewhat different history and social status from those of the rest of India. They do not trace their origins to Turkish or Afghan conquerors, but rather 7th century Arab traders. As a result of their Arab connection, they generally follow the *Shafei* School of jurisprudence rather than *Hanafi*. They are Tamil speaking, have no particular connection to Urdu, and tend to dress according to local custom. Vasudha Narayanan writes:

Muslims from South India pride themselves on being descendants of people who converted to Islam while the Prophet was alive and thus being the oldest among the Muslim communities in India. Of the 2.5 million Muslims in Tamilnadu, about 1.7 million are said to speak Tamil. Their spoken and written Tamil contains many Arabic and Persian loan words, yet it is closely aligned with Standard Tamil and borrows from Sanskrit as well.¹²

This is an important distinction because devotion to the Tamil language allies the Muslim community with one of the most powerful political forces in Tamilnadu - the Dravidian movement. This connection, I will later argue, is one of the most important for understanding why the Pallars of Meenakshipuram decided to convert to Islam.

Social Theories

Having established this background, I would like to explore the various theories that seek to explain Islamic conversion, which I divide up into three types – 1) Social theory 2) Conspiracy theory and 3) Political theory. By superimposing these various interpretive strategies I will try to create something of a palimpsest; effacing ideas and writing new ones on top of them but letting the earlier layers show through. In this way I hope to maintain the subjectivity and agency of the converts while still transcending the historical and geographic particularity of the event (to the extent that it remains useful).

¹¹ Khan, 57.

¹² Gilmartin, David and Bruce Lawrence, ed. *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000): 74.

For social theories I first turn to Richard Eaton, who conveniently outlined the four prevailing models of Islamic conversion used by historians and social scientists in his book, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier: 1204-1760*. The first of these is what he calls the “immigration theory.” In this model, the bulk of India’s Muslims are the descendents of other Muslims who migrated either overland from the Iranian plateau or sailed across the Arabian Sea. While the idea that the bulk of South India’s Muslims are descendents of Arab sea traders may have some currency, it clearly has some problems when applied to the conversions at Meenakshipuram, namely that they were just that – *conversions*. There is no indication that the Pallars at Meenakshipuram are descendents of Arab traders.

The second theory that Eaton addresses is the “religion of the sword thesis.” This idea, that Islamic conversion is the product of military force, has been widely used by historians of early Islam in India, inspired by accounts of Afghan and Turkish conquest. But as Eaton says:

If Islamization had ever been a function of military or political force, one would expect that those areas exposed most intensively and over the longest period to rule by Muslim dynasties - that is, those that were most fully exposed to the "sword" - would today contain the greatest number of Muslims. Yet the opposite is the case... as a whole there is an *inverse* relationship between the degree of Muslim political penetration and the degree of Islamization.¹³

Furthermore, in the case of Meenakshipuram, this theory seems to have little relevance. There has been no claim or evidence that violence was committed by the local Muslims or the South India Isha-Athul Islam Sabai. By all accounts, the Sabai was reluctant to perform the conversions, not violently zealous.

The third model of conversion is the “religion of patronage theory.” This is the idea that Indians of the premodern period converted to Islam in order to obtain some non-religious favor from the ruling class, such as relief from taxes, money, and promotion in the bureaucracy. It suffers from the same problem as the “religion of the sword thesis” – conversion should be greatest where there was the greatest Islamic patronage whereas the opposite is the case. While Eaton is able to quickly dispense with this theory in the case of premodern Bengal, the case is

¹³ Eaton, Richard. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993): 115.

not so easily resolved for Meenakshipuram. A variant of this theory has held wide acceptance with the press, Hindu revivalists, and even the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi. However, the “petro-dollar” or “Gulf money” concept is more appropriately detailed under the category of conspiracy theory, as will become clear later.

The final theory that Eaton outlines is the “social liberation thesis” which I will spend more time on since it appears particularly relevant in this case. Eaton summarizes that:

The theory postulates a Hindu caste system that is unchanging through time and rigidly discriminatory against its own lower orders. For centuries, it is said, the latter suffered under the crushing burden of oppressive and tyrannical high-caste Hindus, especially Brahmins. Then, when Islam “arrived” in the Indian subcontinent, carrying its liberating message of social equality as preached (in most versions of the theory) by Sufi shaikhs, these same oppressed castes, seeking to escape the yoke of Brahmanic oppression and aware of a social equality hitherto denied them, “converted” to Islam en masse.¹⁴

Eaton critiques this theory on the basis that there was no innate notion of fundamental equality of all humankind denied them by an oppressive Brahmanical tyranny. Muslims of the premodern period saw their distinction from Hindus as monotheism versus polytheism, not social equality versus inequality. He goes on to say that, "In fact, the idea that Islam fosters social equality (as opposed to religious equality) seems to be a recent notion, dating only from the period of the Enlightenment, and more particularly from the legacy of the French Revolution among nineteenth-century Muslim reformers."¹⁵

At this point Eaton’s critique does not seem to apply to the case at hand. Regardless of whether or not Islam was a religion that promoted social equality in premodern Bengal, it certainly did in South India, 1981. In fact, social liberation plays a central role in all the accounts of mass conversion at Meenakshipuram, including the RSS Study Team’s. For Muslim authors, Meenakshipuram is the logical outcome of an oppressive caste system. For Christian writers, it is an opportunity for self-critique: Why did they convert to Islam instead of Christianity? Inevitably, the answer is that Indian Christians maintain an immoral caste consciousness that must be shed. For the Hindu revivalists, interpreting conversion as a desire

¹⁴ Eaton, 117.

¹⁵ Ibid., 117.

for social equality inspires self-critique as well: The caste-system has broken down and unless it is fixed the country will be split apart by sectarian conflict.

Eaton later questions the social liberation theory by noting that, "If the theory were valid, then the greatest incidence of conversion to Islam should logically have occurred in those areas where Brahmanic social order was most deeply entrenched - namely, in the core region of Aryavarta."¹⁶ At Meenakshipuram, we have a case where conversion occurred in an area where the Brahmanic social order has been vehemently opposed. So what are we to make of the "social liberation theory" and Eaton's critique of it? In one sense, we are simply mixing apples and oranges: Eaton's discussion is about applying such a theory anachronistically and is not concerned with its relevance in the 20th century. Furthermore, there is the mediating factor of the Dravidian movement. The social liberation that Islam seems to offer may be seen as serving the needs of the anti-Brahmin, anti-caste agenda of E.V. Ramasami's Self-Respect movement.

As for Eaton's own theory of Islam as a civilization building ideology associated with the cultivation of land, it does not seem readily applicable to Meenakshipuram. A very small percentage of South Indian untouchable converts in the 1970's and 1980's were agricultural laborers.¹⁷ Furthermore, the converts were not tribal people "unclaimed" by any dominant tradition. They were within the Hindu "fold," so to speak. It seems then that precipitating elements of conversion must be sought elsewhere.

Abdul Mujahid, who is a sociologist, makes use of a theory called "relative deprivation." This idea, which was originally intended to explain peasant rebellion in the French Revolution, is based on the fact that it is the communities who experience the greatest social gains that are the most likely to rebel. Since actual social status tends to increase slower than expectations, especially when that status is the product of legislation, a disjunction between expectation and reality is created. This disjunction is felt within what is called a relative reference group. In the case of Meenakshipuram, this reference group would be the Thevars, with whom the Pallars share an economic status.

Mujahid includes two variables within this concept – instigating variables (deprivation induced discontent) and mediating variables (the environmental and social conditions that

¹⁶ Ibid., 119.

¹⁷ Mujahid, 48.

determine the outcome of that energy). He then has a dual task. First he must show that the untouchable's economic and social status has improved more in areas where mass conversion occurred than it did in other areas. Then he must show that untouchables continue to be oppressed despite their constitutional protections. By demonstrating the existence of these two factors, he sets up the ideal scenario for relative deprivation to instigate action. To do this he relies on statistical data, all of which is already ten years old at the time of the conversions.

There is no doubt the Pallars have been discriminated against in Meenakshipuram. It is also likely that their status has not increased at the rate of their expectations. But the use of statistical data, besides being easy to manipulate, smacks of behaviorist determinism. Is mass conversion evidence of a powerful agency on the part of the Pallars or is it evidence that Tamils respond to variables in the same fundamental social equation that roused French peasants to revolution (and are in that sense, interchangeable with them)? Ultimately, I think a turn to more immediate local factors leads to a better understanding of Meenakshipuram. To do so, I would like to turn to what I call the "conspiracy theories" which, for all their problems, at least turn the converts into active agents in their own story.

Conspiracy Theories

The first of these is the "petro-dollar" or "Gulf money" theory, which postulates that the converts were swayed by promises of economic rewards. This idea, which is a variation of the "religion of patronage thesis," was the single most common charge made by those who opposed the conversions. Evidence that money was involved seems to come from a single source – a young Meenakshipuram Pallar named Ayappan, who told the RSS study team that he refused the Rs. 500 offered to him if he converted to Islam. All of those who converted flatly refused the idea that they were given money as an incentive and were generally insulted by the insinuation that they could be so easily bought.

But is this theory even feasible? Is it a realistic possibility Arab sheikhs are spending enormous amounts of money to convert poor Indians? Abdul Mujahid provides an excellent summary of the factors involved in this kind of activity:

As far as possibilities are concerned, all of these three factors are feasible propositions. One of the heads of expenditure for *zakat* is *Taleef-al-Koloob*, financial help to a new Muslim. It is a tradition in some parts of South Asia that new Muslims are

honored by the community, by having presented to them one or two sets of clothing, a neighborhood feast, sweets, and some money. As far as the availability of Arab money is concerned, this is also not an impossible supposition. Whether it is a Miami mayor who stood at the door of Prince Alfassi in 1982 to get a donation for a stadium, or the late Mrs. Gandhi who received a Rs. 200 million donation for the Asian Games from the Sheikh of Kuwait, “no one is refused at the door of a Sheikh.” It is quite possible that someone might have acquired some money for this “Islamic cause.” As for smuggling this amount into India, it is also said to be an easy thing in a country where the underground economy is sometimes estimated at 40 percent of the size of the legitimate economy - and even that might be an understatement. A long coast and lightly checked borders with Nepal and Sri Lanka plus the practice of the *hundy* system (illegal and extralegal money transactions) from Indian overseas workers in the Gulf and Southeast Asian countries makes it possible to get money - not to mention people and goods - in or out of India.¹⁸

But the possibility of cash inducements raises some prickly questions. Despite the claims of the RSS study team and the *Indian Express*, there seems to be no actual evidence that the converts showed signs of an improved economic status. On the contrary, census data indicates that the Pallar community in Meenakshipuram was already better off than most and for the most part, financially independent. Furthermore, Rs. 500 hardly seems to offset the loss of the government concessions provided for untouchables. Finally, if converts are bought so easily, why did no Thevars convert, when they are equally poor? The credence given to the “petrodollar” theory in the newspapers appears to be grossly out of proportion to the availability of evidence.

The second conspiracy theory that gained wide attention has already been alluded to above. It revolves around the killing of two Thevar watchmen in December of 1980, which brought on a wave of police aggression towards the Pallar community. I’ll first give Mumtaz Ali Khan’s account of the event, which is more detailed than Mujahid’s and reveals a “significant social situation that has an important link in the conversion movement.”¹⁹ It goes like this:

¹⁸ Mujahid, 87.

¹⁹ Khan, 37.

Thangaraj's Story

The prelude to the murder of the watchmen is a love affair between a young "militant" Pallar named Thangaraj and a Thevar girl. Due to the strained relationship between the Pallars and the Thevars, the couple decided to elope. They escaped to Kerala in order to prevent any violence, where he then converted to Islam and married the girl. After the marriage, they returned to Thangaraj's village but were refused, as the villagers feared the possible repercussions of harboring him. Instead, the newlyweds went to the nearby town of Maikere.

In Maikere there was an estate owned by two Christians where Thangaraj was able to find a job. This worked out fine until there was a dispute between the managers over employment. Two Thevars, Subbiah and Rama, were brought in to act as watchmen. Exactly what happened next is unknown but, for whatever reason, the two watchmen were murdered and thrown into the Hanuman River nearby.

The local police inspector who took up the case reportedly harbored a deep resentment towards the Pallar community. The murder of two Thevars provided the perfect opportunity for him to exact his revenge. He had Thangaraj arrested and kept in the lock-up, where he was beaten daily. Even though the deputy superintendent of police and the collector were untouchables, they were kept ignorant of the Thangaraj's incarceration and were not able to protect him.

In order to prevent the Pallars from organizing any kind of opposition to Thangaraj's arrest, the police inspector initiated a program of intimidation and brutality. As Khan says, "There were a number of atrocities against and untold miseries of the people [sic]. The people had to face these hardships day and night. Even women were not spared by the police. Many individuals were tortured. It is said that one man was kept in the lock-up for 34 days and one woman for five days."²⁰

For the Pallars of Meenakshipuram, this was the last straw. While conversion had been discussed a number of times before, there had always been insufficient consensus on the decision. This time, the whole community was able to reach an agreement and they contacted the South India Isha-Athul Islam Sabai soon after.

²⁰ Ibid., 38.

There was a certain ambivalence about the importance of these events among Khan's informants. Some noted that conversion had been discussed by the Pallars for years and Thangaraj had nothing to do with it. Others see a direct causal connection. What is interesting in terms of this paper is that all three sociological studies of Meenakshipuram that I found made reference to this story in some form or another as a precipitating event in the Pallar's conversion. But this seems to beg the question – how should scholars approach such conspiracy theories? Is it a tendentious village anecdote or an essential element for understanding the conversions? While Khan attributes great importance to the Thangaraj story, Mujahid only refers to it in its most basic form, instead relying on more universal theories of class, religion, and economics.

I tend to be sympathetic to Paul Brass' argument in *Theft of an Idol*, where he presents these types of conspiracy theories as important loci for the hermeneutical process:

Social scientists are trained to be skeptical of conspiracy theories and to leave the attachment of blame to journalists and the judicial system, but this has too often led to the objectification of social processes and the reification of categories such as class, ethnicity, or even “human nature” in a fruitless search for ultimate causes that ignores the dynamics of events, the significance of the interpretations - more or less tendentious - which are presented to “explain” them, and the uses to which the events and their explanations are put.²¹

Approaching the Thangaraj story in this way, the Pallars of Meenakshipuram are allowed to become agents involved in a hermeneutical process of their own, acting upon the narrative in order to create meaning and sense out situation that has sparked off such fierce debate.

More importantly, it should be recognized that there is always a number of different agents acting upon these types of narratives, each crafting the story in their own way. In this case, the RSS study team expanded upon the Thangaraj story to include a much wider and more threatening “counter conspiracy,” full of Christian/Muslim intrigue.²² Their version goes like this:

The village of Meenakshipuram is situated in a region that is notorious for interstate smuggling and other gang-related crime. Involved in this activity was an estate run by some

²¹ Brass, 8.

²² The following account is given in Seshadri, p. 6-8.

Christian padres. They ran an orphanage in which they would raise untouchables and convert them to Christianity. They also possessed a printing press donated by the U.S. based Douglas Charity, which they used to generate counterfeit currency. The counterfeit was then laundered through Muslim trading channels.

The police were able to stumble across this counterfeiting ring because they were investigating the murder of two Thevar watchmen by a group of Pallars, which included Thangaraj (a notorious local goonda). It appears that the Thevars, who were hired to keep a watch on Thangaraj, discovered his connection to the counterfeit money and were subsequently murdered as a cover-up. The group of Pallars were then taken into custody and the police “used their usual methods on them.” In the following interrogations, the counterfeiting activity was discovered. Despite their connection, no legal action was taken against the Muslims because of their political clout. This then provided an opportunity for the Muslims to convince the Pallars to convert to Islam. They were told that as Muslims, not only would they be protected from any police action against them, but also the Muslims community would provide them with money and lucrative business opportunities.

These conspiracy theories, while being of little value in uncovering the actual sequence of events, say a great deal about the perceptions and concerns of those involved in their propagation (information which should be important to scholars trying to understand them). For the Pallars, they are caught up in an exciting story of star-crossed lovers and evil police inspectors. For Hindu revivalists, Meenakshipuram is evidence that the Christians and Muslims are colluding against them in a dastardly conspiracy. Veracity aside, it is important to recognize the difference of these types of narratives from the sociological theories given above: In the conspiracy theory, members of the narrator’s community become active agents responding to specific and historical events.

While I believe this information is valuable, it does raise a tricky question – is the key to understanding conversion in understanding the converts or is it in understanding the facts of the event? On the one hand, I find little value in theories that do not allow the converts to be responsible and willful agents. On the other, conversion is not purely a matter of conviction. The conversion-as-conviction theory is, in fact, most frequently cited by the opponents of mass conversion and Hindu revivalists: While few have publicly challenged the right to conscience of an individual convert, many have asked, “How can a whole community of people convert out of

conviction?" Is it feasible that so many people could have a transformative religious experience simultaneously? Frequently, the answer comes as a conspiracy theory about coercion or economic rewards.

Political Theories

Another way in which this question is answered is by a theory of political strategy. This idea is most exhaustively explored in Gauri Viswanathan's book, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*. In this excellent study, she examines individual testimonies of conversion in the 19th and 20th centuries as strategies of subversion against the secular nation state.

The book begins with 1858, which significantly is the year in which British parliament passed the Jewish Relief Act and the British Crown took control from the East India Company. India was now under the rule of a secular nation-state whose commitment to tolerance and inclusion relegated belief to the private realm, minimizing its power to affect the public realm and imposing the threat of homogenization. As Viswanathan says, "... in a disestablished society where 'truth' is no longer a function of belief but of what is amenable to codification, proof, and administration, the potential of private judgment to act upon a world enveloped and defined by public doctrine is minimized, even marginalized."²³

Even more importantly, the secular nation-state placed religious identity in the hands of a civil administration:

The guaranteeing of fundamental rights, including the right to freedom of conscience, elevates abstract principle to the level of individual subjectivity. The compulsions of belief are absorbed in a discourse of rights that contains the contradictions of preserving religious difference, while denying it, by transforming difference into a legal, or constitutional issue.²⁴

From this vantage point it becomes possible to see through some of the facile assumptions about conversion made by the RSS and VHP. Independent India, which adopted England's strategy of religious tolerance, maintained religious identity as a legal category in a secular administration. In doing so, they marginalized the role of conviction in defining those categories – it is not belief

²³ Viswanathan, 47.

²⁴ Ibid., 46.

that makes one a Muslim or Hindu in the eyes of the law. The converts at Meenakshipuram, far from undermining the importance of conviction (it was already undermined), demonstrated their dissent while affirming the liberal, tolerant, pluralistic foundations of the modern democratic secular nation-state.

Gauri Viswanathan also takes an interesting look at the conversion of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to Buddhism in 1935. For Ambedkar, who was invoked by the Meenakshipuram converts as frequently as E.V. Ramasami, religious identity was constitutively political.²⁵ He sought the possibilities of nationhood "for a social class denied access to political power through self-representation, yet seeking a course of action that *preserved* rather than eradicated difference."²⁶ On this point, Ambedkar bitterly disagreed with Gandhi, who primarily wanted to eradicate the social disabilities of untouchables:

Few reformers fought as hard for lifting the stigma against untouchability as Ambedkar did, but he was also acutely aware that when the issue of legal eradication of disabilities supersedes, or at best subsumes, the issue of full political equality and full guarantee of rights, the effect is like to be one of acculturation, or induction into the norms, values, and ideologies of the modern, "tolerant" state.²⁷

For Ambedkar, then, "His primary objective thus lay in demonstrating that modern secularism was essentially a universalist world-view stalling the process of enfranchisement and creating the conditions for partial, rather than full, citizenship."²⁸ His twenty year long threat to convert to Buddhism was part of a search for "alternative conceptions of nation and community that resist being encompassed by preexisting, received forms of the state and its apparatuses."²⁹

In the end, however, Ambedkar's mass conversion movement did not have the outcome that he desired, as the residents of Meenakshipuram were no doubt aware. "When Ambedkar finally converted to Buddhism in 1956, most Hindus breathed a sigh of relief, because in their view Buddhism did not pose a threat or a challenge to the concept of a predominantly Hindu

²⁵ Ibid., 230.

²⁶ Ibid., 213.

²⁷ Ibid., 214.

²⁸ Ibid., 215.

²⁹ Ibid., 216.

India, which Islam or Christianity certainly did."³⁰ For most Indians, Buddhism was simply a sub sect of Hinduism and the “neo-Buddhists” were unable to maintain an identity of difference. Their social status underwent little or no change.

The Pallars of Meenakshipuram were aware of Ambedkar’s conversion movement and frequently referred to him in their testimonies as an inspiration. They also rejected conversion to Buddhism as an option, most often citing ignorance of its customs and beliefs. I suspect, however, that underneath this claim is another assertion – that Buddhism is simply another kind of Hinduism (It is telling that even the RSS praises Buddhism as an excellent choice for those untouchables who wish to convert). They know that the “neo-Buddhists” have not achieved equal social status with caste Hindus and a conversion to Buddhism does not have the same obvious aesthetic power of *difference* that a conversion to Islam does.

This preservation of *difference* is what made Islam an effective choice. The spotty relationship between Hindus and Muslims was well attested in recent history, a fact which would protect them from the homogenizing force of modern secularism and Ambedkar’s fate. Even better is the Tamil Muslim’s historical alliance with one of the most powerful political and social forces in modern South India – the Dravidian movement. This collusion of variables, I argue, is why the Pallars were able to reach a consensus to convert as a political strategy of dissent.

The Dravidian Movement

The Dravidian movement, which began in the early 20th century, is a blanket term used to cover a number of different political agendas. It represents anti-Brahmin, anti-Aryan, anti-Hindi, and sometimes anti-religious sentiment. E.V. Ramasami (also known as Periyar, “The Great Man”) is frequently invoked in the convert’s testimonies. Politician, iconoclast, staunch supporter of untouchables, he is the patriarch of Tamil nationalism.

Born in 1879 to a middle-class family, by 1920 he had entered congress in the then Madras Presidency and fought to end untouchability. Frustrated, he joined the Justice Party in 1926, spearheading his Self-Respect Movement. A fierce rationalist, he opposed everything he saw as preventing Tamils from creating a modern society, including religion, caste, and even devotion to Tamil. Even greater was his opposition to the compulsory use of Hindi in

³⁰ Ibid., 235.

government and education. For E.V. Ramasami and many other Tamils, Hindi was the agent of Aryan, Brahman, Sanskritic, North Indian imperialism. After the Justice Party fell apart, he started the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) to promote the Tamil cause in congress. Its success was eclipsed in the 1950's, however, by a less radical splinter party, the Dravida Munerra Kazhagam (DMK).

What is significant about Ramasami in this discussion is that he is idolized as a devotee of Tamil despite the fact that he consistently disparaged its use in a modern society. Sumathi Ramaswamy, in her excellent book on Tamil devotionalism, describes his unique status:

Why did Tamil's devotees absorb Ramasami into their ranks, despite his stunning disparagement of their object of devotion? They lionized him for his leadership of the anti-Hindi struggle: since so much of *tamilparru* [devotion to Tamil] from the 1930's defined itself in its opposition to Hindi, it follows that Ramasami's catalytic role in these protests bestowed the aura of a Tamil devotee on him.³¹

South Indian Muslims as well, who pride themselves on their involvement with Tamil literature,³² are able to be associated with the Dravidian Movement by virtue of being anti-Brahmin and anti-Hindi. Abdul Mujahid states similarly with regards to Tamil Muslims support for the DMK along with the Muslim League:

This dual regional and communal color is expressed in the erstwhile Madras state by Muslims' cooperation with the Anti-Brahmin Movement, in the pre-independence pro-communal award campaign, and by Tamil Muslims' support to the Muslim League. In their political responses, Tamil Muslims are similar to other Tamils in the sense of sharing in the regional politics of anti-Brahmanism and Dravidian nationalism.³³

The significance of these political concerns should not be underestimated. As Sumathi Ramaswamy has shown, the politics of language and identity have crystallized in Tamilnadu largely in opposition to Brahmin Hindi speakers. If the untouchables of Meenakshipuram wished convert as an exit strategy from their subordinate social status, then it would be

³¹ Ramaswamy, Sumathi. *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891-1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 241.

³² See Narayanan, "Religious Vocabulary and Regional Identity" in *Beyond Turk and Hindu*.

³³ Mujahid, 60.

reasonable for them to choose a position that put them in the greatest opposition (and most advantageous position) to the power structure that they wished to subvert. Thus Islam provides the greatest alternative to caste Hinduism which, for the Dravidian nationalist, represents Aryan, Brahmin, North Indian imperialism.

Conclusion

In this paper, my purpose was to present the Muslim converts of Meenakshipuram as interpreting agents, formulating a strategy of dissent in a secular nation-state. Their embrace of Islam signaled a claim of political power through self-identification, informed by both Ambedkar and E.V. Ramasami. Buddhism, while it was Ambedkar's choice, failed to provide a viable option because of its acceptability and lack of difference. Christianity maintained the very caste structures that the converts were attempting to escape. Islam, especially because of South Indian Muslims' connection to Tamil and Dravidian nationalist politics, provided the ideal platform from which the converts could voice their dissent.

As Gauri Viswanathan has shown, the stage upon which this dissent occurred was not one of conviction and belief – the secular nation-state has precluded such a possibility – but of constitutionally recognized categories of identity. Recognizing that belief had little influence in a world defined by public doctrine, they redefined their own religious identity in a way that was powerful precisely because it was constitutively political.

Having done so, the converts become involved in a process of interpreting “how” and “why.” For some it was the logical outcome of a commitment to E.V. Ramasami's Self-Respect movement. For many it was the dramatic dénouement in Thangaraj's love story. Journalists, scholars, and the RSS also became involved in this project. All sought (as I do) to order fact according to aesthetic rules in an effort to create a cohesive image that is both emotionally satisfying and conforms to causal logic. Understanding the converts is not simply a deductive process of distilling fact from rumor, but a creative one of seeing a world in which star-crossed lovers, criminal Christian missionaries, and Muslim conspirators form the necessary backdrop for significance and meaning.

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