Conversion and the Curse of Caste

By M N Srinivas

In his article "Conversion Debate: A Clash of World Views" (March 27), Professor T K Oommen makes several misrepresentations regarding Hindu society, Hinduism, and the results of conversion. He states that "during the colonial time (sic) substantial number of Dalits and Adivasis did embrace Christianity, and they did this in order to escape ritual degradation and oppression." As a result of an Act of Parliament passed in 1813, missionaries were permitted to enter India. The missionaries saw in India a vast and populous field in which the "true" faith. The religion of the Hindus came in for severe criticism and ridicule: caste, untouchability, polytheism, idolatry, immoral gods and goddesses, animal sacrifice, hook swinging, child marriage, dowry, sati, polygyny, polyandry, etc.

Dual Identity

The missionaries had links with the British rulers, links of religion, race and culture. A large number of natives saw them as just another arm of the colonial government, a perception that endowed them with power and prestige. Thanks to the support of British officials, missionaries were able to start a number of schools, hospitals, craft centres, homes for orphans and destitutes, and so on. These institutions won the respect and admiration of the people, of even those who did not directly benefit from them. More importantly, as far as Hindus were concerned, missionary activity stimulated thoughtful individuals to look at their own religion and society critically and embark on the path of dissection. Thanks to the "true" mission of the missionaries, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, with the support of the British government, started their own mission of Christianising the Hindus, and the results of conversion proved to be a success, as the British rulers, links of religion, race and culture.

However, on the negative side, the Christians were discriminated against by the colonial government, a conflict that characterized the colonial era. The British rulers, links of religion, race and culture.

But were Dalits able to shed untouchability and enjoy the same status as converts from higher castes? The answer is "no". The stark fact is that they continue to experience discrimination both within and without the church. They are not allowed to occupy the pews meant for the higher castes, and they continue to marry within their caste.

The Plight of Christian Dalits: A South Indian Case Study, by Godwin Shiri: "Because of the miserable, nay beggarly, situation into which they are being pushed, they are forced to adopt a dual identity — a Hindu identity for the sake of getting some state help which is vital for their very survival, and a Christian identity because of their spite of acquiring a social status ... In fact, they are people 'caught' in a triangle of sorts, a socially oppressive society, a communally discriminating state and a church which, though least concerned about their plight, is often moralistic in the demands it makes on them."

It is no wonder that Dalit Christians are demanding that they be given the same facilities and concessions which the Scheduled Castes are getting. Christian leaders are backing this demand with political agitation. However, there is another side to this problem, namely, the failure of the church to deliver on the equality promised to the converts. Not only that, the church's failure is made out to be the state's. However, thoughtful and sensitive Christians are distressed over the continuing caste inequalities in the church. May add here that during the 1980s, I was invited to participate in a seminar of South Indian bishops on the persistence of caste in Christianity.

Frail Man

Before I conclude, there is one last point. Professor Oommen ends his article with the statement that the conflict over conversion is really a conflict between "dynamic, converting religions" and "static, non-converting religions". Leaving aside the issue of how conversions are carried out — the Supreme Court, for example, has emphasised that 'inducements' and 'allurements' are illegal — this use of the words 'dynamic' and 'static' is peculiar. One of the makers of the 20th century was a physically frail member of a "static religion" who fought for the rights of the oppressed and exploited coloured peoples of South Africa, and then devoted the rest of his life to fighting for the freedom of his country from British rule. Fifteen years after his death, Afro-Americans in the US were inspired by his example to fight successfully for their rights by launching a civil disobedience movement. Prof Oommen may have heard of him. (The author is an eminent sociologist.)
be based on some universal model.

One of the questions that came up at
the symposium was: “What is science?”
Terms such as “parallel knowledge sys-
tems” and “indigenous knowledge sys-
tems” were frequently used by social
scientists. Indeed, an entire session
was devoted to the topic “Other Knowledge
Systems: Beyond Science”. However,
from a scientist’s point of view, there is
no pre-ordained definition of science.
Science is a knowledge system built on
universal principles. Nothing in this
approach prevents other forms of knowl-
edge — indigenous, traditional, civilisa-
tional so on, — from being subsumed in
what we call science. This would involve
a process of validation — observation, ver-
ification, repeatability and a codification
based on a minimum set of universal prin-
ciples — that forms the basis of the
methodology of science.

What are, however, not universal are
the modes of science-society linkages that
involve complex interactions among sci-
ence, technology, economics, culture and
politics. In this sense, therefore, science,
including the process of science and tech-
nologies, has both an exogenous and
endogenous character. The post-colonial
legacy of a West-driven S&T system has
had an important consequence for coun-
tries such as India. It has suppressed not
just the endogenous aspects of applica-
tion of science, but also the endogenous
aspects of the process of science — indige-
ous and traditional knowledge systems
such as Ayurveda or traditional farming
or water harvesting methods. The latter
has been largely, if not entirely, displaced
by modern, or “Western”, science as many choose to call it.

There is, however, an increasing real-
isation today that there is an urgent need
to give these “other knowledge systems”
or “indigenous knowledge systems” their
due place and value in society. More so
at a time when the process of globalisa-
tion is threatening to appropriate ele-
ments of this collective knowledge of
societies into proprietary knowledge for
the profit of a few. However, a validation
of the civilisational and traditional sys-
tems of knowledge using the methodol-
y of science is essential for their
integration with modern science and a
“knowledge exchange” internationally.
The symposium called for such an
approach to form an important compo-
nent of the new science-society contract.

While some people would hold the
view that such a validation process itself
is “Western science-centric” and, there-
fore, not an entirely correct procedure,
there is inherent in this argument a
Catch-22 situation which does not con-
tribute to advancing the cause of other
forms of knowledge. For example, with-
out such a validation, “knowledge sys-
tems” such as astrology, Reiki and Vastu
Shastra, which are patently unscientific,
would begin to demand space in a sci-
ence-society discourse.

What is, however, more important is
to ensure protection of IPRs for validat-
ed traditional knowledge systems such as
Ayurveda. There was a general consensus
at the symposium with regard to placing
on record in Budapest the fact that the
Trade-Related Intellectual Property
Rights (TRIPS) agreement of the WTO
makes no distinction between these
knowledge systems, which have been
evolved by societies over centuries, and
the ones involving inventions of modern
science. Participants of the symposium
felt that the new social contract must
demand an amendment of the TRIPS
Articles to give due protection to such
knowledge bases.

EVEN though the details and specifics
of responses to changing science-soci-
ety linkages in the West may not be of
immediate relevance to developing soci-
eties, their broad contours do offer
lessons. Prof. Michael Fischer of the
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
(MIT) outlined the evolving new contract
in the U.S. and its experiences. He said
that the question of involving social sci-
cences and humanities in the field of nat-
ural sciences has assumed new relevance
in view of the developments and trans-
formations in science itself. There was, he
observed, an overall shift in the relative
positions of different sciences today.

Prof. Fischer said that while the role
of universities remained central, their ori-
entations needed to change. The laying
of a certain social basis in the pursuit of
science, he said, was happening by means
of widening the curriculum base in insti-
tutions such as the MIT to give rise to
what he termed “the post-modern engi-
neer of the contemporary era”. At anoth-
er level, he pointed to the practice of
science shifting from academic institu-
tions to commercial enterprises, from
government centres to transnational cor-
porations, from the hitherto separated-
from-the-market research to market and
patent protected research, from individ-
ual credit to dispersed and commer-
cialised knowledge, and from
government regulation to social move-
ments (environmental sciences entering
the public sphere).

This tendency towards the instru-
mentisation of science towards the mar-
et was emphasised by Dr. Kazancigil,
who said that the new contract has to
recognise this as an undesirable develop-
ment because it has led to, on the one
hand, “global competitiveness” and the
consequent shrinking of state interven-
tion and reduced public funding, and on
the other, restricted access to informa-
tion, data and results arising from com-
mercial interests. This has also imposed a
certain “short-termism”. Good science,
however, requires a long-term or medi-
unum-term vision that comes with open
science. Dr. Kazancigil said: “Science as
public good is increasingly at threat.”

One of the aims of the Bangalore sym-
posium was to generate inputs to the
Budapest Conference, with a developing
countries’ perspective. Towards that,
the symposium came up with a set of rec-
ommendations for consideration in
Budapest. Called the Bangalore
Communique, it sets out the strategy to
meet the expectations of a developing soci-
y from science in the 21st Century. It
recommends a plan of action that will rein-
force, as well as reorient, the science-soci-
ety relationship for equitable development and
for protecting the environment.

Besides, the symposium suggested
amendments to the draft declaration on
Science and the Use of Scientific
Knowledge to be adopted in Budapest.
The UNESCO headquarters in Paris had
sent a draft of the declaration for consid-
eration in Bangalore. There was wide-
spread disagreement at the symposium
over the formulation of the UNESCO
draft. It was felt that the draft failed to
reflect adequately the developing coun-
tries’ perspective and that, in a sense, it
reinforced some of the elements of the
existing science-society relationship. The
document was discussed and amended to
include in it the concerns of developing
countries which account for nearly two-
thirds of the world population.

These two documents together encap-
sulate what needs to be articulated in a
world forum like the WCS in order that
the concerns of developing countries will
be heard and be given due place in the
future practice of science and modes of
development. However, only the Budapest
meeting will show whether all this would
lead to tangible moves that could benefit
the developing world, and whether the sci-
entific community of the South has any
voice in world forums at all.