



COMMERCIALISATION OF THE GOSPEL AND EXTORTION WITHIN PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES IN TAPI DISTRICT, GUJARAT: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION

R. Trivedi

Department Of Comparative Religion And Philosophy, Demos Foundation Center For Research In Humanities, Shankarrao Kirloskar Marg, Erandwane, Pune.

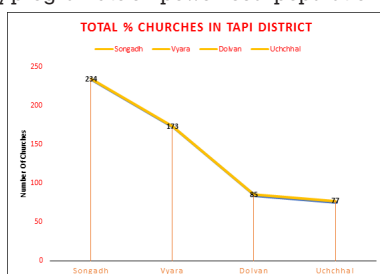
ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the concerning phenomena of the commercialization of the gospel and extortion practices allegedly occurring within Pentecostal churches in the Tapi district of Gujarat, India. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the study employs in-depth case studies drawn from the field, alongside analysis of relevant media reports, to illuminate instances where religious practices may have been exploited for financial enrichment and coercive conversions. Specifically, it investigates allegations of manipulative fundraising tactics, promises of miraculous cures in exchange for donations, and other methods used to extract money from vulnerable congregants. Beyond the economic dimension, the research also explores the broader socio-political implications of these activities, particularly within the context of Tapi's predominantly Hindu tribal population. This includes examining how these practices might contribute to social tension, religious polarization, and anxieties surrounding cultural identity. The findings suggest a critical need for increased regulatory oversight of religious institutions and the implementation of ethical reforms within Pentecostal churches operating in the region. The paper argues that such measures are essential to prevent financial exploitation, protect vulnerable individuals, and ultimately maintain communal harmony in the culturally sensitive context of Tapi district. Furthermore, the study calls for a nuanced understanding of the complex interplay between religion, economics, and social dynamics in order to develop effective and culturally appropriate solutions.

KEYWORDS : dev birsa sena

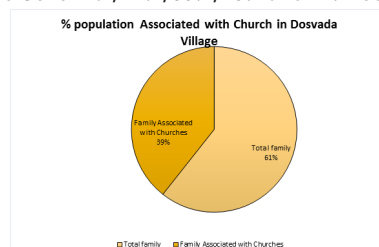
INTRODUCTION

The Tapi district in Gujarat, India, has emerged as a focal point for discussions surrounding the commercialization of the gospel and allegations of extortion within Pentecostal churches. This region, predominantly inhabited by tribal communities, has witnessed a surge in Christian missionary activities over recent years. While many of these initiatives aim to provide social services and spiritual guidance, certain practices have raised concerns among local populations and authorities. The conversion of tribal communities into other religions initiated the religious change and cultural change in the community. It has resulted in westernization, urbanization and changes in cultural practices, ritual, occupation, tradition causing harmful repercussions of tribal ethnicity and values [1]. Together with the Adivasi's belief system and worldview, their egalitarian ideology and the relation with nature have to be considered in order to understand their social system. The Adivasis are organized into local communities, equally ranked and having democratic assembly and consensus [2]. Allegations of forced conversions, financial inducements, and the erosion of indigenous cultural practices have been reported, leading to heightened tensions between religious communities. Pentecostal networks in Gujarat, such as the Church of North India (CNI) and the Friends Missionary Prayer Band (FMPB), have focused on the holistic development of tribal communities. A significant event in 2013 saw the merger of 210 churches established by FMPB into CNI's Gujarat Diocese, aiming to strengthen community ties and promote development initiatives. These initiatives include setting up youth development centers, healthcare activities, and animal husbandry programs to empower local populations [3].



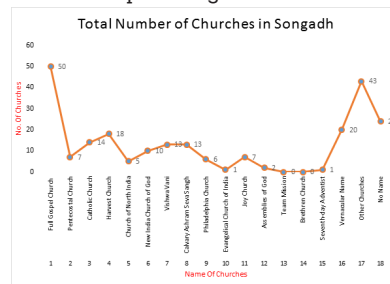
Graph:1- The dominance of Churches in four talukas of Tapi district.

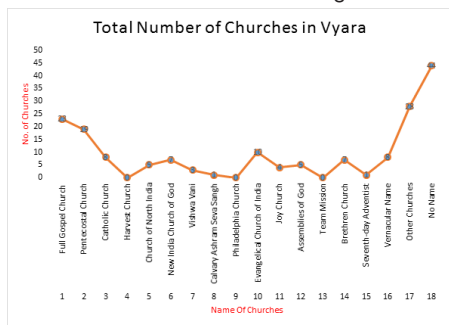
Total percentage of new religion place in Songadh, Vyara, Dolvan and Uchchhal, 41%, 30%, 15% and 14% respectively.



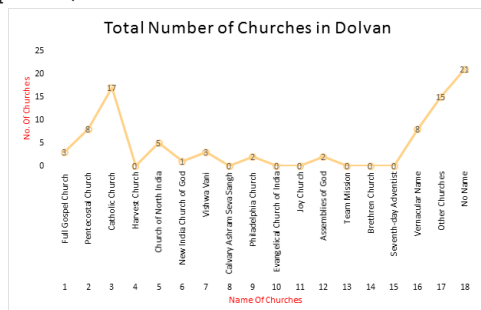
Graph: 2- Population dynamics of Songadh Taluka where Dosvada Village has 61% population is converted in Christianity.

At the beginning many factors observed in the district that missionaries becoming familiar with the Adivasi religious mentality, besides the original sin theory of Christianity, they established theory of faithfulness. This results in genocide of Adivasi religion, culture, and believe in the whole district (Graph-2). The Dosvada village where 61% of population follows Christianity, due to this external disturbances, internal absolute segregation of family and society become normal in the district. Upto to certain level Adivasi family values are collapse, when the Christianity as the ideology offers oppressed social strata increasing distance among the community. Furthermore, the Christianity was considered as destroying the social order which stressed the paternal relationship between Bhil Raja and his people, as well as filial piety as the most essential virtues. Sometimes, social systems undermining and destroyed legitimacy of Adivasi ideology, the society also involved in conflict and protest against this conversion.



Graph-3: Total number of churches in Songadh taluka.**Graph-4:** Total number of churches in Vyara taluka.

The district such as Tapi, where majority of the Adivasi community residents live on small pieces of land which barely have playground for children. The church started to apply Eurocentric understanding of the land and creatively adopt a recombinational model which would use land ownership which is an asset of Adivasi community. Total 18 different missionaries are creating their hybrid model and evangelization of Adivasi in Tapi district. It is problematic to observe that the church has a captive mindset to establish its own scheduled agenda which affect the majority of the population. This demographic change observed in nearby district Valsad, where the total number of churches are continues increasing, in 2001 the only 15 churches reported in 2021 reaches to has been reported⁵. The different association of churches has different strategies. The church should be complex in support by not only being role model to making its owned land by changing mind of local community (Graph 3 to 6).

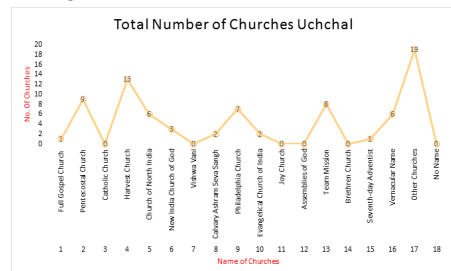
**Graph-5:** Total number of churches in Dolvan taluka.

Vyara and Songadh Taluka having more than 230 and 170 churches respectively which shows adaptation and penetration mechanism of missionaries in town place of district (Graph-3 and 4). The Full gospel churches activities are overshadowing in the both town area whereas Catholic churches evangelical and captive activities observed in Dolvan taluka (Graph-5). It is important to note that some local churches are proactive in their advocacy efforts in making the land they own accessible to ordinary residents of their local communities.

There is a great ideological space developed in tribal society in Gujarat, where it takes from overt propaganda campaigns against Adivasi rituals, where vernacular churches play significant role (Graph-6). These tactics may target specific demographics or societal groups of Adivasi community leads to vulnerabilities of community [11].

Above graph suggest the total number of churches increasing which follows by increasing the population of these individuals, often suffering from ailments easily resolved or prone to spontaneous remission, were actively invited to prayer meetings and religious gatherings. At these events, they were promised miraculous cures and divine intervention through the Christian faith.

These promises were often reinforced by theatrical and emotionally charged rituals, such as the laying of hands, anointing with oil, and collective prayer, which were portrayed as conduits for miraculous healing. The subsequent perceived or actual recovery from minor illnesses, whether attributable to natural healing processes or the placebo effect, was then presented as concrete and irrefutable evidence of the power and efficacy of the Christian God. This alleged demonstration of divine power was then strategically leveraged to persuade individuals to abandon their traditional beliefs and practices in favor of conversion to Christianity, often creating a dependence on the missionary group for perceived well-being and spiritual guidance.

**Graph-6:** Total number of churches in Uchchhal taluka.

There is around 236 churches found in vernacular language among them most are in Songadh, few of the churches also running NGO in dialect language replace the RAO named as Mandal. The current reality of lack of confidence among Adivasi community cause of tension in local people and a "serious dilemma" for struggling protecting own religion and culture. On other hand, churches involved in education, health and skill development activities, Uchchal where 5.47km² area only having total 77 Churches proactive (Graph-6). These results give the scenario of the churches that force to adapt new culture to Adivasi community of district.

Collaborative Mental Health Initiatives

Faith-based organizations in Gujarat have also collaborated with allopathic mental health practitioners to address community health needs. A case study highlighted the benefits of such collaboration, including improved health outcomes and livelihood restoration, by integrating belief systems in care and recovery.

Table-1: Hierarchy & Activities Table

Denomination	Hierarchy Structure	Key Roles	Local Activities in Tapi	Notes
IPC (Indian Pentecostal Church)	General Presbytery → State Presbytery → District Presbytery → Local Church Council	Pastor, Elders, Deacons	Sunday Worship, Bible Study, Youth Fellowship, Healing Crusades, Outreach	First Pentecostal church in South Gujarat started here
UPCI	General Conference → Districts → Local Churches	Pastor, Deacons	Worship Services, Evangelism, Baptism, Pastoral Training	Presence in Tapi not confirmed, follows standard UPCI structure
Manna Full Gospel Churches	Presiding Bishop → Regional Bishop → Local Pastor	Pastor, Elders	Church Services, Gospel Meetings, Bible Training	Known in Gujarat,

Case Studies

1. Forced Conversion in Vyara (2022)

In April 2022, a complaint was lodged in **Vyara**, alleging that a **Christian family forcibly converted two Hindu girls to Christianity**. The complainant, Mansiben Gamit, claimed that she and another girl were detained and coerced into adopting Christian rituals. The accused were charged under the Gujarat Religious Freedom Act and the Indian Penal Code for wrongful confinement and cheating [4,5,6,7].

2. Demolition of Hindu Temple in Nana Bandarpada (2022)

In October 2022, reports surfaced that an ancient **Hindu temple in Nana Bandarpada** village was demolished to construct a church. Local Hindus alleged that they were prevented from offering prayers at the site during the **Navaratri festival by local Christians**, leading to communal tensions [8,9,10].

3. Objections to Religious Gatherings in Songadh (2024)

In December 2024, a four-day religious event organized by Christian leaders in **Songadh** faced objections from local Hindu groups. The **Dev Birsa Sena** raised concerns that the gathering would lead to religious conversions among tribals. The organizers denied these allegations, but the event highlighted the sensitivities surrounding religious activities in the region [9,10].

DISCUSSION

The incidents in Tapi district reflect a broader trend where religious institutions, particularly Pentecostal churches, are accused of exploiting faith for financial and conversion motives. This trend, observed in various parts of the country, involves allegations of vulnerable individuals being lured with promises of healing, prosperity, or solutions to personal problems, only to be subjected to forced conversions and financial exploitation. Critics argue that these practices often target marginalized communities, leveraging their socio-economic vulnerabilities and lack of awareness. Concerns are raised about the ethical and legal implications of such activities, with accusations ranging from misrepresentation and undue influence to outright fraud. This has sparked debates regarding religious freedom, the regulation of religious institutions, and the protection of vulnerable individuals from potential abuse. The issue also highlights the sensitivities surrounding religious conversions and the potential for social discord when these processes are perceived as coercive or exploitative. Such practices not only contravene ethical standards but also pose challenges to social cohesion in multi-religious communities. The lack of stringent regulatory frameworks allows for the proliferation of such activities, necessitating urgent attention from both governmental and religious bodies.

CONCLUSION

This study used a biblical conclude framework on the role of the church in the current conversation of available to ownership of land in Tapi district. The church has own ship of many institution with financial supports and assets, but still involving in de-tribilization of Adivasi. While the majority of Pentecostal churches in Tapi district operate with force conversion and promises of healing, the reported cases of commercialisation and extortion highlight the need for comprehensive reforms. Implementing regulatory measures. The case studies from Tapi district illustrate the complexities surrounding the commercialization of the gospel and allegations of extortion within Pentecostal churches. Pentecostal churches, actively proselytizing in the Tapi district, have been largely responsible for the religious conversion of tribal communities to Christianity. This conversion has resulted in significant and multifaceted cultural shifts. These shifts include the erosion of longstanding traditional practices, the weakening of tribal

identities, and the disruption of social structures. Concerns have been raised regarding the methods employed in these conversions, with allegations of exploitation through deceptive "healing sessions," manipulative "faith-based" conversion tactics, and instances of economic fraud preying on vulnerable community members. The long-term consequences of these religious changes raise questions about the preservation of indigenous heritage and the potential for social and economic destabilization within these tribal communities.

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